



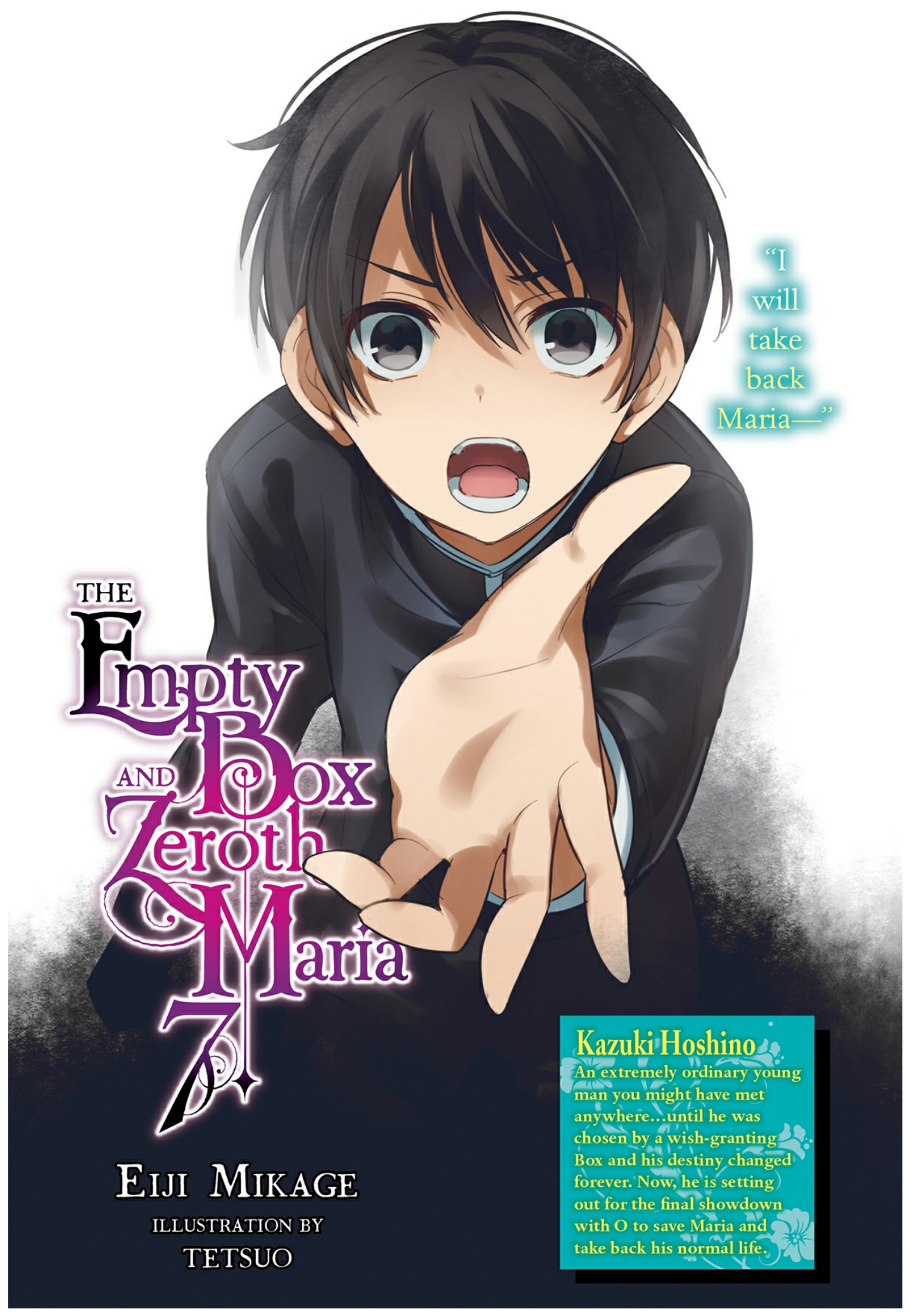
THE
Empty
AND Box
Zeroth
Maria
FINAL
7

EIJI MIKAGE

ILLUSTRATION BY TETSUO

VISIT...

LANZAROTE
Caliente.COM



“I
will
take
back
Maria—”

THE
**Empty
Box
Zeroth
Maria**
7

EIJI MIKAGE

ILLUSTRATION BY
TETSUO

Kazuki Hoshino

An extremely ordinary young man you might have met anywhere...until he was chosen by a wish-granting Box and his destiny changed forever. Now, he is setting out for the final showdown with O to save Maria and take back his normal life.



"I'm
actually
proud
of it."

"...You aren't
embarrassed to
be with me?"

"Um?"

Kokone Kirino

A girl in the same class as Kazuki. She's upbeat and sociable, and she can be a bit of a busybody. Daiya Oomine has been a friend of hers since kindergarten.

Daiya Oomine

A cunning cynic. He has no qualms about killing or deceiving if it serves his purposes. He once used the Box "Crime, Punishment, and the Shadow of Crime" to face off with Kazuki.

Kasumi Mogi

Kazuki's classmate. A delicate and demure girl who uses a wheelchair due to an unfortunate accident. She is the object of Kazuki's affection, and she returns the sentiment.

"I'm in your hands
today, Kazuki."



"I'm going to become you? But then what's going to happen to you?"

Maria Otonashi

A girl who believes there is nothing that makes her unique. The only source of pride for her is the perfection of her older sister, Aya, whom she idolizes. She single-mindedly works to live out her sister's final words.

"You're going to become me—no, you have to."

Aya Otonashi

A young "prophetess" capable of predicting future events—even her own death.

"I really am impressed."

"Your mind is completely shattered, language is lost to you, you can't even think, and you have no will. Yet, you keep hitting that wall."

"It's futile, but you keep going solely for the sake of your ardent wish to see Maria Otonashi."

"You wounded your own soul, even changed your nature as a human, just to find her."

"You are a truly terrifying foe, but this can't last forever. Even the soul has its limits."

"When it is worn away, when your fixation on Maria Otonashi disappears, this world meant for you will become a void. I'll watch until it happens."

"I am the embodiment of this Box. There is no escape."

"Why won't you give up? Why won't you cease this behavior?"

"...I shudder to even think it, but is there no end to this? Will you never stop?"

"What are you?"

"Who are you?"

"No...it's impossible..."



A full-page illustration of Maria Otonashi from the anime 'Sword Art Online'. She is a young girl with long, wavy brown hair and large, expressive green eyes. She is wearing a black, high-collared dress with a large bow at the neck and black thigh-high stockings. Her hands are outstretched forward, palms facing up, in a gesture of surprise or reaching out. The background is a dark, swirling, smoky or ethereal grey. In the top left corner, there is a red rectangular box containing yellow text. In the bottom left corner, there is a red rectangular box containing yellow text.

“Kazuki,
I’m right
here!
Kazuki!”

Maria Otonashi
The “zeroth Maria”
Kazuki is looking for.



THE
Empty
AND Box
Zeroth
Maria
7

EIJI MIKAGE

ILLUSTRATION BY TETSUO



New York

Copyright

The Empty Box and Zeroth Maria, Vol. 7

Eiji Mikage

Translation by Luke Baker

Cover art by Tetsuo

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UTSURO NO HAKO TO ZERO NO MARIA Vol. 7

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Contents

[Cover](#)

[Insert](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Afterword](#)

[Yen Newsletter](#)

Prologue



Is it happening again? Am I going to find myself back in that scene I can remember only in dreams?

“Have you made your preparations?”

In this apartment that was once Maria’s, in this room where no one lives, I stand face-to-face with O, and I think.

The woman before me now is so terrifyingly beautiful that I almost lose myself as I look at her. Her long hair reminds me of Maria’s, and her slender face and long limbs are worthy of any top model. Her lips are fixed in a smile... Yes, “fixed” is the perfect way to describe it: that smile so perfect, it looks as if someone has taken the face of an exquisitely made doll and placed it there.

The uncanny expression stirs a primordial fear in me. I’ve seen it many times before, but I’ve always forgotten it outside my dreams.

...But I won’t be forgetting it anymore.

After all, O is no longer some unknown entity. I have come to understand that she was born of Maria’s Box, the Misbegotten Happiness.

If forgetting is the Box’s power, then I can resist it now that I’m aware that I hold the Empty Box.

That’s right. I have to keep this in mind!

—Aya Otonashi...

She is the enemy.

“

”

It’s okay.

I can think straight again, now that I’ve got it into my head that she’s my foe.

The room smells of the aromatic oil I sprinkled, and the scent of peppermint reminds me of my goal.

—To take back Maria.

—To make her a part of my normal life.

—To meet the zeroth Maria who knows nothing of Boxes.

I will do anything to accomplish what I've set out to do, and I've already sacrificed friends in the process. If murdering everyone in the world is what it takes, then I will. I'm not exaggerating; I mean exactly what I say.

I let loose a big breath, then glare up at O.

"Have you made your preparations?" She flashes that perfect, eerie smile. "To say your good-byes to this world."

I scowl at her with as much loathing as I can muster. "And why should I have to do that?"

Yes, the Boxes have obliterated the normal life I cherished above all else.

Yuri Yanagi—forever tormented by the murders she committed in the Game of Indolence.

Iroha Shindo—lost her very self to her obsession with the false miracles of the Boxes.

Koudai Kamiuchi—lost his life.

Ryu Miyazaki—murdered his parents and went to prison.

Riko Asami—gone missing.

Kasumi Mogi—can no longer walk.

Kokone Kirino—deeply hurt in both body and soul, no longer able to make decisions normally.

Haruaki Usui—lost his friends, including me.

Daiya Oomine—most likely will never return.

And as for me, Kazuki Hoshino—

I gaze at my right hand, still freshly scarred from a self-inflicted wound. It symbolizes the horrible things I've done, the madness that's overtaken me from which I can never truly recover.

"But—"

I clench my right hand closed, and a power that feels almost limitless wells up

within me.

That's right. No matter how hopeless the situation may be, I cannot give up on this world.

"You failed last time." O doesn't care as she taunts me. My angry glare doesn't seem to bother her at all. "What you're trying to do is get Maria Otonashi to hand over her Box of her own volition, right? You do realize your own actions have made that impossible?"

I bite down lightly on my lip. She's right.

"You sacrificed Kokone Kirino to bring down Daiya Oomine, fully aware of Maria's principles. You knew it would ensure she would never listen to another word you have to say. And you were right."

"Urgh..."

I couldn't come up with anything better at the time, but Maria will likely never forgive me. I screwed myself over.

I fall silent, and O carries on.

"Still, that doesn't matter, either. Something even more disastrous is happening to you, after all."

What's she talking about?

O provides the answer before I can ask the question.

"Maria Otonashi has lost her memories of you."

"Wha—?"

I'm trying to get Maria to cast aside her Box. All she wants is a Box to wish for the happiness of others, and my goal is to make her abandon it. As resolute as she is, I never truly imagined getting through to her for a second.

It was hopeless to begin with—and now she's lost her memory?

I'm supposed to persuade her when she doesn't even know me? ...There's no way. I mean, who's going to even hear out a total stranger, much less care what they have to say? My words can't reach her anymore.

I'm desperate.

No, I'm despairing.

And yet, there is another emotion that holds even greater sway over my heart.

"...She...forgot about me...? Forgot our time together...? That's..."

No! I can't accept that!

"Nh....."

I've become a stranger to Maria. We spent a lifetime together that bound us as one with a connection tighter than any other—and it's gone.

Maria. Even if I do manage to see you again, will you not know who I am?

Maria. Even if I call out your name, will you not turn around and smile?

Maria. Is the Maria I know gone forever?

If so, then what am I fighting for? Maybe I can destroy her Misbegotten Happiness, but if she doesn't remember anything about me, that will only widen the gulf between us.

"I can see your hope is fading."

Of course it is. Even destroying the Box itself won't give me what I'm truly after.

Still—

"But you won't give up, right?"

No, I won't. For some reason, she's exactly right.

Despite the sadness weighing on me, I keep my gaze steady on O's face.

Maria may no longer know who I am, but I will save her. She may not want me to, but I will.

I won't give up... No, that's not entirely accurate. Now that I have the Empty Box, giving up isn't even on the table. I will keep pursuing her, even if it means losing myself in the process. To find her, I will dive into the suffocating, blinding darkness at the bottom of the sea. Giving up has never been an option.

O's smile fades at my determination. I've never seen this intensity in her

expression before, not during any of our previous confrontations within the Boxes.

“I’ll be honest with you. I find that part of you just a bit frightening.”

—I’m her enemy.

Unlike before, O now clearly regards me as a foe.

“There is no hope for you. It’s undeniable... And yet, you still can’t help but feel you will sway Maria Otonashi’s heart with the power you’ve been granted.”

The power of a “savior” who destroys Boxes.

Maria’s wish to make everyone’s wishes come true created the Misbegotten Happiness. However, a Box grants wishes with complete and utter thoroughness. When it granted hers, the Box also manifested her belief that such a thing could never be, and her unspoken desire for someone to stop her.

Maria’s conflicting wishes gave birth to two beings.

A being who grants wishes—and a “savior” who ruins them.

O—and Kazuki Hoshino.

I am the “knight,” the only one who can rescue her.

“Yeah.”

I gaze at my wounded right hand. It holds an enormous power, a power capable of eradicating even O.

The reason I don’t do away with O on the spot is that destroying her would be the equivalent of destroying the Misbegotten Happiness. If I were to destroy that Box forcibly, it would shatter Maria’s mind.

I know this because she rejected me. But it’s also true that the only reason I exist is because she wanted me to.

That’s why there has to be a way, no matter how hopeless things may seem. That’s what I believe, what I am able to believe.

Okay, let’s make one thing clear.

How am I going to go about saving Maria?

There's only one answer. I must free her from the girl who stands before me.

I say "her" name.

"Aya Otonashi."

Aya Otonashi once again smiles at me without concern.

"Aya Otonashi, you say? It's true that I look like her, and that I was in a sense born from her. However, I am not the actual Aya Otonashi."

"I guess not. You're Aya Otonashi as Maria sees her: an image come to life. Completely separate from the real one who actually existed. The real Aya Otonashi was probably incredible. But no matter how extraordinary she was, she was still human. She could never have been so otherworldly. Something within Maria led her to put the human Aya Otonashi up on a pedestal."

Thinking of Maria's situation, I grit my teeth.

"Maria can't escape such an enormous presence. She will always be bound by this 'Aya Otonashi,' driven by her. 'Aya Otonashi' is the monster she wants to become, and to that end, Maria is disregarding and trying to erase her own self. So—"

I turn my right hand toward O threateningly.

"So release her, 'Aya Otonashi,'" I tell her in no uncertain terms.

O is, naturally, unfazed. "You're talking to the wrong person. I have no idea how to release her. I'm sure you don't, either, of course... Yes, but still, I know exactly what action you will take."

"What?"

I don't have a clue what I should do next. O is saying she can read my next move when even I don't know what it is.

"How do I know? You have only one move to make, and you're going to take it, no matter how hesitant you may be, how foolhardy it may seem. It will be a vain struggle, a wasted effort—a dive into the abyss of the sea. It won't offer you a shred of hope, but it is your one option."

At that, I remember what O said before.

“...And that single option is what you were saying—”

“Yes, to leave this world.”

I can't figure out exactly what she's talking about.

But she's right. For some reason, I'm positive she's right.

“You will depart this world, most likely never to return. If my enemy vanishes forever, then it goes without saying that I win. Once that happens, Maria Otonashi will ceaselessly pursue her misbegotten, hopeless wish until she eventually consumes herself and reaches her end. All I need to do is wait.”

“I won't let that happen, though.”

“True. If you did return to this world, it would mean you freed Maria Otonashi using some method I had not foreseen. That would be the moment of my defeat, and my disappearance. That moment would be when you free Maria Otonashi from her older sister—‘Aya Otonashi.’”

Okay, I get it.

In short, I need to make it back—to the normal life I've cherished all this time.

Do that—and I can meet her.

The Maria who was driven so far, far away, whom I never encountered even in the repeating world. Maria, bare and unadorned.

The Maria who will never experience a single loop.

—The zeroth Maria.

Yes—but how difficult is that going to be? My beloved normal life is already in ruins. How am I supposed to bring Maria back to a place that no longer exists?

Even so, I will continue to struggle no matter how foolish it may be, exactly as O says.

“So this is our final showdown, Kazuki Hoshino.”

O spreads her arms.

She sets her eyes firmly on me, and her beautiful, hideous face contorts.

“May you live in happiness in the misbegotten world.”

And O embraces me.

It's revolting. But as much as I want to refuse, I can't. I try to grab O by the shoulders and push her away, but my hands are pulled into her formless body. It's like becoming entangled in a spiderweb. I slip in bit by bit, becoming a part of her.

I can't breathe.

I'm drowning inside O.

Ever so slowly, I sink. It's so gradual that it feels as if my senses aren't working. But I can see the light pulling away from me, little by little. I sense faintly that I'm descending.

Sinking, sinking, sinking for eternity—

What is this place?

It's like the bottom of the bottom of the bottom of the sea, but it's bright, as if there is a sun.

An incessant noise worms its way into my hearing. There's the sound of laughter coming from somewhere, but I can't tell whether it's near or far. Not even plugging my ears makes it go away. It's so loud that I want to stop thinking.

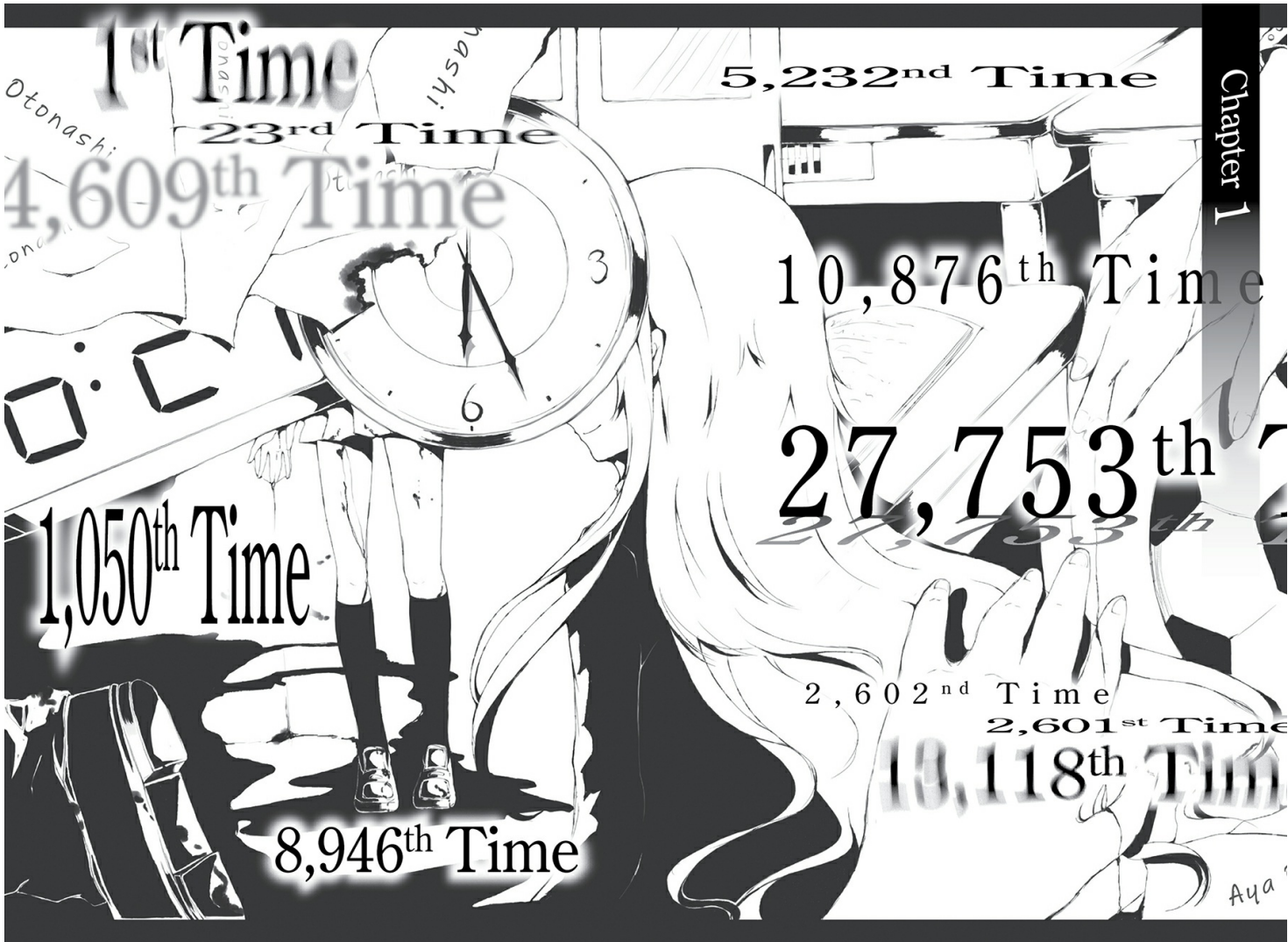
Though my breathing has stopped, I don't feel any pain. My form is melting into space, blending with the environment around me. This place is taking control of my body.

I'm losing myself.

I'm vanishing.

I don't know what's going to happen. But I am certain of one thing.

In the end, I will dissolve and be no more.



1st Time

5,232nd Time

23rd Time

4,609th Time

10,876th Time

27,753th

1,050th Time

2,602nd Time

2,601st Time

13,118th Time

8,946th Time

Chapter 1

Aya

1st Time

“I love you, Kazu.”

I don't care. I don't have time to worry about love now.

23rd Time

“I love you, Kazu.”

Give it up already. Saying that isn't going to change anything.

1,050th Time

“I love you, Kazu.”

I'm happy. Of course I am; how else am I supposed to feel when someone with a smile as wonderful as hers says she has feelings for me?

13,118th Time

My brain is stuck in my head like a piece of gum squashed into the pavement by hundreds of shoes. An icky feeling clings to my body, like I'm swimming in a pool of used oil. I'm spinning. Around and around and around and around, like I'm in a washing machine. Nothing about the scenery around me changes. It's only utter darkness and deafening laughter.

I can't see anything.

It's repeating.

Over and over, this will continue until my body melts into the darkness. I will spin around and around, repeat over and over, until my cells break up. Again and again.

—I wake up.

Fighting down nausea, I rub my eyes and check where I am.

There's a blackboard at an angle. I must be in a classroom.

"...Was that a dream just now?"

I'm lying on the floor. I get up, scratching my head.

The classroom looks different from usual. For starters, the positions of the desks have changed. They've been pushed together into groups of four and covered with brightly striped tablecloths, and the windows are decorated with individually made paper flowers. On the blackboard, there's a cute drawing of a maid—probably drawn by a girl—with text written to the right of it: *Cosplay Café*

"...Ha-ha." I chuckle mirthlessly. It's such a silly thing to see after the nightmare I had. "That's right. Today is..."

October 10. Saturday.

The school festival.

As soon as I remember, even the babbling around me becomes comforting.

"What are you doing? Why are you just holding on to that thing and staring off into space?"

I know that voice.

"Hmm? —Hey!"

I turn toward it, but I quickly look away again.

—I—I mean, come on, her legs were right there! Perfectly shaped in white knee socks!

“Oh-ho! What’s with that reaction? Have my beautiful legs got you all hot and bothered?”

“N-no!” As I protest, my gaze rises.

Kokone Kirino is grinning down at me, dressed in a light-blue maid outfit like Alice from *Alice in Wonderland*. “Slacking off while everyone’s busy. What were you doing?”

“Uh...”

What *was* I doing before I fell asleep?

I remember lying down because I was bored and wasn’t sure what else to do. I had stayed up late the night before working on festival preparations, so I guess I must have dozed off.

I can feel something cylindrical in my hand. That’s right. I needed some energy, so I was going to eat an Umaibo (my favorite flavor, corn potage). Umaibo are like energy drinks for me, and yet they’re only ten yen. So cheap. Let’s all buy some.

Thinking I’d better get back to work, I bite down on the thing in my hand.

—*Clack*.

“...Um?”

This is too hard for an Umaibo.

“Y-you think you can just play my alto recorder right here in the classroom...?!”

“Huh?” I look at what’s in my right hand. For some unknown reason, I’m holding an alto recorder instead of an Umaibo. “Wh-what?”

“Ewwwww, perv! What’s wrong with you?!” Kokone screams.

“...U-um? N-no, no, y-y-you’ve got it all wrong!”

“Ewww, he wants to lick my recorder! His tongue’s gonna be all over it! He’s gonna take it home and put it on his family’s altar! He’s gonna start blowing soap bubbles with it! Yeah, he’s gonna be playing a cheerful little song and blowing bubbles!”

“What kind of pervert is that?!”

—But try as I might, I really don’t recall picking up an alto recorder.

Which means...

I let out a big sigh. Now that I’ve calmed down, I ask Kokone slowly, “Hey... You switched my Umaibo for the recorder, didn’t you?”

This had to be one of Kokone’s pranks.

“Um, what are you talking about?” she asks, playing dumb. “Why would I do something like that? What sort of mental state would make me want some boy’s mouth on my recorder? We aren’t even dating. What high school girl would do that?”

“You tell me.”

“God, use some common sense! An innocent teenage girl would never do this, right? You know that, don’t you?”

“Yes.”

“So you stole my recorder yourself and played it. That’s the only answer. You’re a pervert. Admit it. I’m not letting you off the hook until you do.”

“Come on...”

“Say ‘I’m a pervert.’”

At this point, fighting back would only make things worse. I surrender completely. “I’m a pervert.”

“Okay, now... ‘I’m a pervert. I stare at the spots girls missed when they were shaving and get off on their humiliation.’ Go ahead.”

“I’m a pervert. I stare at the spots girls missed when they were shaving and get off on their humiliation. I’m especially into armpits.”

“Eep! A-a pervert! Stay away!”

Why’s she acting legitimately creeped out? It’s kind of ridiculous, considering she’s the one who made me say it.

“By the way, Kokone. You look good as a maid.”

“Wow, way to change the subject. Well, I was starting to get bored anyway, so I guess it’s okay... So, my maid outfit. It definitely is cute. I look good no matter what I wear, right? No one else comes close, don’t you think?”

“Of course. I’ve never seen anyone as beautiful as you; water is wet; et cetera.”

“What’s with the weak compliments?! You’re the one who started it!”

I do think she’s cute, but I can’t react any other way when someone’s just tooting their own horn...

“Maybe you’re upset because my maid outfit doesn’t show off my chest enough? You’re saying I need to put my E-cup boobs out there more and seduce you!”

No, I’m not.

“So not only are you a recorder-blowing sicko with an armpit fetish, you’re a knee sock-loving mazophiliac! When they said it’s always the quiet ones, they were talking about you! These E-cup boobs— O-ow!”

Someone bonks Kokone on the head before her loud rant can go on any more.

“Ugh...”

The one responsible is Daiya Oomine. He looks annoyed.

He’s recently been wearing his hair black, and his left earlobe is full of holes with no earrings to fill them and break school rules. His handsome features and cynical attitude led to him being nicknamed “the Renegade Prince.”

That said, he has lightened up a bit as of late—and there’s no better proof than the butler outfit he’s agreed to wear for the school festival, just because his classmates told him to. That would never have happened before.

But if a butler were ever actually this cynical, he’d get fired on the first day for mouthing off to his mistress... Wait...maybe there’d actually be a demand for them?

Anyway, even though Daiya is rough on everybody, including me, he does put the brakes on Kokone when she starts to get carried away.

“Thanks for stepping in, Daiya. Tell her to cut it out.”

“You’re right...”

Daiya would normally say something like: *Now, this is a real eyesore. You can doll yourself up all you want, but there’s no hiding who you are inside. They say the clothes make the woman, but this is just lipstick on a pig.*

More or less anyway.

As I wait for the storm, Daiya begins his sarcastic quip.

“Don’t flirt with other guys in front of me; it makes me jealous.”

I’m sorry?

Um, what?

Is... Is Daiya blushing...?

“...Whoa, whoa, whoa.” I’m confused.

Wh-what’s going on here...? A lot has happened between the two of them, and I know they started going out recently, but still...!

“Ah, uh...” Kokone’s face grows red as I watch, suggesting that she wasn’t ready for that, either. “H-hey...! I—I don’t like anyone but you, Daiya...so don’t worry...” Kokone’s voice gets softer and softer; she’s acting extremely feminine now.

“Don’t you think you’re letting your guard down around Kazu too much?”

“He’s a friend! That’s all!”

“Hmph, I guess that’s fine. I just think you don’t fully realize how attractive that side of you really is, so it bothers me to see you doing that.”

“O-okay. If you say so. I’ll be careful.”

Once her embarrassment fades, Kokone smirks as if an idea popped into her head. She then plants her head against Daiya’s chest and rubs it around.

...Man, they’re just going at it like I’m not even here. Get a room, guys.

“Oh...did you change your cologne?”

“Surprised you noticed.”

"I smell you every day. I'd know. But cologne is against school rules. You're not supposed to be wearing it."

"Says the one bleaching her hair."

"You're the one who told me I look better with brown hair than black. I'm fine with wearing glasses again and even keeping my hair black, but I'm not changing anything if this is what you prefer."

"Yeah, it does look nice on you. You don't need to go back to how you were. I like you this way. But that's not what we were talking about, was it?"

"...Yeah." She looks at Daiya through her lashes. "...You look so good as a butler. Hey, hey. Say 'Welcome home, my lady!'"

"Dumbass. You think I'd say that? You say 'Welcome home, Master.'"

"Fiiiine. Welcome home, Master... Hey, next time I go to your place, I'll put this on and say it!"

I can't take this anymore.

What the hell...?! Th-they're being all lovey-dovey! Kokone is one thing, but what's up with Daiya?! I never wanted to see him like this! Who are you, and what have you done with Daiya?!

"Kazu. Why're you staring with your mouth hanging open like an idiot?"

"D-don't ask me what's wrong! Quit showing off how flirty you are!"

"We have to. I'm popular with girls, so if I don't demonstrate that I have a girlfriend, then there could be all sorts of problems."

"...I have a lot I could say about that, but I'll keep it to myself for now—anyway, aren't you embarrassed?"

"I don't recall dating someone I'd be embarrassed to be seen with."

Says the guy whose cheeks are turning red.

"...You aren't embarrassed to be with me?"

"I'm actually proud of it."

"Hee...hee-hee-hee-hee-hee."

“Hm-hm.”

“Hee-hee-hee-hee-hee.”

“Hm-hm-hm.”

Enough already! I don't want to hear this!

As my face turns even redder than theirs, someone places their hand on my shoulder. I turn around.

“They're terrible, aren't they? They're just showing off in front of the two single guys—what else would they be doing?!”

It's Haruaki Usui, a mutual friend of all of ours.

“Exactl— Hey!” I start to nod in agreement, but then I see what he's wearing and jump away.

He's cosplaying, too, but for some reason, he's wearing the girls' uniform from another school. His broad shoulders more than fill out the uniform, but the top reaches only to his belly button, revealing the green shirt he has on underneath. The skirt is covering a pair of brawny baseball player legs, drawing attention to the muscles underneath. *You could have at least shaved!*

More importantly, why isn't he embarrassed? Is this his house or something?

“Aw man, I want a cute girl, too. You're the only one on my side, Hosshi.”

“.....Psh.” I brush his hand off my shoulder.

“Huh? What's wrong, Hosshi? You're being so cold.”

“...I know what's going on, Haruaki,” I tell him quietly, in a voice I don't normally use.

“...What do you know?”

“Apparently, you've been getting close with a girl from another school lately. Word is you even went on a date.”

“Urk.”

“...Aha! I got it! That uniform belongs to the girl you're dating, right?”

“.....”

A tight smile rises on Haruaki's face, but he says nothing. Looks as if I was right on the money.

"I'm the only one on your side, huh? You've got some nerve saying that to me when you've been doing your fair share of flirting yourself. It's a blatant assault on all of us singles."

I point this out to Haruaki with a sickeningly sweet smile.

"...No...it's just... Ya see, we aren't going out or anything. It's all still up in the air. I guess it simply feels easier for me to keep playing the guy none of the girls want..."

"Ptooey!" I pretend to spit. "You're like one of those rich guys who gets off on acting homeless!" I chuckle, still smiling that fawning smile.

"Y-you really gotta take it that far? I'm not sure I get the comparison, either... I mean, if you're gonna bring that up, then what about you?"

"What about me?"

"Kasumi— Mmgh!"

Kokone covers Haruaki's mouth the instant he says her name.

As for me, I go completely red and snap my mouth shut, too.

After all, Kasumi Mogi is the name of the girl I'm in love with.

Th-that's odd. Why would Haruaki mention her even though I've never talked about this before?

Kokone whispers into Haruaki's ear in a hushed voice. "...You idiot, Haru. Their relationship is still fragile... Just leave it be..."

"...Oh, really? ...But c'mon, it's obvious they both like each other..."

"...That's why you need to drop it! If we get involved in their romance, it'll make things weird... The two of them can't imagine taking it anywhere..."

"...Seriously? What're they, in elementary school or something...?"

Uh, I can totally hear you guys.

B-but wh-what're they saying about us both liking each other? That's not

possible. Mogi does smile at me a lot, but...that's—that's just because she's a cheerful person. And she only asks me for help a lot because I'm easy to ask.

...Yeah. Yeah. That has to be it.

But.

But if the two of them are saying it, then maybe she really—

“Kazu.”

“Eep!”

I yelp when I hear the voice of the very person I'm thinking about, and whirl around in a panic.

“U-um?” The slim girl in the wheelchair, Kasumi Mogi, stares at me, wide-eyed at my dramatic reaction. “Why did you scream? Do I not look good as a nurse...?”

Mogi's mouth shuts, and she lowers her head. She's wearing a pink nurse's uniform in her wheelchair.

E-even Mogi is cosplaying...

I was so startled that now my heart is thumping like crazy. It's so loud; can't everyone hear it? Flustered, I can't look her in the eye.

Of course you look good; how could you not?! Everyone knows my fetish for licking up tears, but I'm into maids and nurses, too! (Full disclosure.) You'd be cute even without the nurse cosplay!

I have to make sure she knows!

As Mogi gazes up at me expectantly, I tell her what I think.

“You look great! You're really cute!”

“C-cu—”

“It's true! Supercute! Insanely cute!”

“~~~~~!!”

Mogi turns bright red and looks down at her lap.

Huh? What's wrong? All I did was give her my honest opinion.

“Oh boy, here we go again with Hosshi and his oblivious charisma that gets him all the girls.”

“I’ve started to think lately that it’s all deliberate.”

“No way. That’d be too devious for him.”

“Those innocent-looking guys can get laid easier than you think. They can tell exactly what housewives really want. I learned this from women’s comics.”

Haruaki and Kokone are roasting me here.

“H-h-hey...!” Mogi speaks up to cut them off. She stutters from her embarrassment, but she pulls herself together and looks at me.

“Yeah?” I say.

“I’m in your hands today, Kazuki.”

She bows her head.

“In my hands”...?

The words light a fire in my heart, even though I have no idea what they mean. But Haruaki, Kokone, and now even Daiya are smirking at me... Oh. Now I know what she’s getting at.

Today, I’m going to spend the whole school festival with Mogi, showing her around.

After losing the ability to walk in an accident, Mogi is still in rehab, so she hasn’t completely returned to school.

That being the case, her classmates wanted to help her be a part of the school festival, to show her that she’s one of us.

We thought of various ways she could enjoy the festival without any inconveniences. As we were talking it over, we realized someone would need to accompany her the entire day, and for whatever reason, it was unanimously decided that that person would be me.

I gladly agreed, of course. It’s not a bad thing at all. Obviously, I’m delighted at the chance to spend time with Mogi. To tell the truth, I think it’d be wonderful if the memories of this festival make the time she spends in physical therapy a

little easier.

Mogi's head is still lowered, but I smile at her. "I'm the one who's counting on you, Mogi," I tell her, and then I bow.

"Oh! Hey...! Um, I'm sure I'm going to be a burden, so thank you." Mogi bobs her head at me again.

"Please don't hesitate to ask whatever you want. I'm not entirely confident I can make this fun, but I'll do my best."

Bow.

"Ah...! Don't bow! I'm happy to hang out with you! So thank you, really!"

Bow.

"Eh-heh."

Bow.

"Eh-heh-heh."

Bow.

Bow, bow, bow, bow.

I'm not sure why, but we keep bowing to each other with embarrassed grins on our faces.

"Tei-YAH!"

"Ow!"

A moment later, Haruaki clonks me on the head.

"You're mean, Haruaki..."

"That's what you get! You were just on my case because I had a date!"

...Well, I guess I *am* in a pretty happy place here. He's not wrong.

"Hey, Hoshino. You've stayed in the classroom long enough, so get moving," calls our class president, Miyazaki. He sounds slightly annoyed. He's not especially pissed off at us; that's his default attitude.

"Guess we'll head out, then," I say to him, taking the handles of the

wheelchair. “Let’s go, Mogi.”

“Okay!”

And with that, I begin pushing the wheelchair.

Yep, this is it.

This is how the best day ever starts again.

“.....Huh?”

——*Again?*

Something feels ever so slightly wrong—but when Mogi turns around with a smile, that feeling vanishes.

No matter where you are in the world, school festivals always end with a bonfire... I’m lying. The truth is, I have no idea how widespread the practice is.

The students are doing a folk dance to “Turkey in the Straw” in the red glow.

Earlier, we stumbled across a first-year couple confessing their feelings for each other (boy, was that a surprise!), and now they’re holding hands happily. We didn’t stick around to watch the whole thing, but it would seem it was a success.

Further back, Kokone and Daiya are dancing, having changed back into their school uniforms. The two of them have a complicated past that made their relationship pretty thorny. And still, they confronted this past and decided to be together. I’m sure what happened before will eventually create more hardship for them down the road. But for now, that doesn’t matter, and they are dancing in apparent bliss.

Mogi is back in her school clothes, too, sitting in her wheelchair and staring into the rippling flames. Her gaze is intense, as if she’s trying to engrave this moment deeply into her memory.

These special moments don’t come often. I may only be in my second year of high school, but I can tell that much. These bright, youthful memories are the treasures of a lifetime, ones that I will tightly hold on to forever.

I’m sure that goes for Kokone and Daiya and most of the other students here.

This school festival will become a story to remember when they get older. Not all of those stories may be fun ones, but this special day will most likely have an ongoing significance in their lives.

After all, it'll never come again.

Observing the dancing couples, Mogi softly mutters, "It must be nice."

I react with a start. I mean, Mogi can't dance in her condition. She notices my surprise and waves her hand vigorously.

"Oh, it's not what you're thinking! I'm not sad because I can't dance! I'm just jealous that they can be together on such a special day!"

I instantly know she's telling the truth; her expression is perfectly content.

"Kazu."

We *did* spend all day together, so I understand how she feels.

"Back when I ended up like this, I had this thought...that I could never be happy again, at least not in the normal way. Maybe I could force myself to be cheerful, maybe I could find the bright side here or there, but no matter what, my condition would always haunt me. I thought that, even when I had a smile on my face, it would always be lingering in my mind somewhere."

What she's saying has a self-deprecating edge to it, but Mogi's expression is peaceful.

"But you know, I never felt any frustration or depression about it today. Not even once; it's true! This is huge! I really want to dance with you, but the fact is that I can't—and you know what? I'm completely fine with that. And I'm not lying to myself because I don't have a choice or something; I'm just thinking it's okay because I'm still happy anyway. Isn't that amazing?"

I grin and nod deeply.

"I've enjoyed today, truly, and I'm so happy with myself for it." Mogi squeezes my hand. "Thank you for helping me feel this way."

I'm sure the red tint on her cheeks is more than the firelight. As I see her expression, I know what she's going to say next.

“I love you, Kazu.”

That smile is more beautiful than anything in the world. No exaggeration—that’s really what I think. And this smile is for me and me alone. Of course nothing in the world could make me happier. I would do anything to protect this smile!

This feeling welling in my chest is almost too much to contain and threatens to spill out of my mouth. Every cell in my body is jumping for joy.

This is the greatest day in my life, bar none.

This day...

This day that I want to repeat over and over again...

“Ah.....”

—*This charade is a pile of horseshit.*

A cold breeze joins the warm one brushing my cheek, and the knifelike chill instantly cools the madness in my head.

Man, this place is disgusting. The tender scene in shades of red looks like an oil painting now, covered in a sheen of strangeness. And that’s all it is: an empty image.

“Heh-heh—,” I laugh with contempt. I was such an idiot to not remember until now.

“...Kazu?”

Mogi’s head is tilted in confusion at the sudden change. But I ignore her and look at my right hand.

I knew it. The scar is missing.

—The resolution I made to save Maria has vanished.

I can’t use my ability to destroy Boxes in this state.

I look into Mogi’s wide eyes.

I’m happy she let me know how she feels. Her feelings are unmistakably sincere, and after so many loops, I’ve grown more and more attracted to her,

until my feelings for her became real, too.

I'm completely in love with her.

But there is nothing beyond this tale. It ends with her professing her feelings and me reciprocating. No further developments.

Yeah, now that I think about it, I've been through this before. My role was different, but I experienced it in the Rejecting Classroom. Mogi confessed her love to me countless times. She was glad her feelings were reciprocated, but she still despaired because it never went beyond that. Just as before, it's all worthless.

Yes, comfortable though it may be, this world is a lie. No matter how happy it seems, that happiness will always be fake. Right?

I mean—she isn't here.

Maria isn't here.

This is a world that functions on the premise of her absence. A happy ending, of a sort. Maybe we could have found ourselves living this life if she hadn't brought the Boxes into our midst. Maybe it was all the fault of O, of the Misbegotten Happiness.

By bringing in the anomaly of the Boxes, Maria has proved harmful to us.

But—

"It doesn't matter."

—I live. I live only for Maria.

"...Kazu? What's wrong?"

While this situation is exactly like the one from the Rejecting Classroom way back when, I doubt Mogi is trying to seduce me again. But I can't imagine it's a total coincidence, either. Maria was affected by spending such a long time in that world of repetition. Because of that, her Misbegotten Happiness gained a power similar to the Rejecting Classroom's.

Namely, the ability to maintain a life of eternal bliss.

It's all a sham, though—just a loop of a single day.

That's right: My enemy, O, intentionally captured me and threw me into this realm.

The moment I accept this happiness, the moment I decide I'm okay with Maria's absence, I will have lost to O, and I will remain a prisoner here.

That's why I have to say what I'm about to say to Mogi. For the two of us for whom tomorrow will never, ever arrive, this relationship leaves me only one reply.

"...Wait until tomorrow," I tell her in a strained voice—then I turn my back on Mogi and run off.

"K-Kazu...?!"

Ignoring her calls for me to stop, I enter the school and bound up the stairs to the roof. As soon as I open the door, the light of the setting sun shines into my eyes.

"Huff...huff...huff..."

If I'm going to resist the repetition of these days, I need to hold on to my memories.

In the Rejecting Classroom, it was the shock of seeing Mogi or Maria get hit by a truck that allowed me to keep my memory intact.

I'm not sure, but I should be able to pull it off this time, too, if I do something similar. And I knew how the moment I decided to come here.

Jump off the roof!

I run toward the chain-link fence as fast as I can. Dashing with everything I have dispels the fear that would otherwise hold my legs to the ground.

Leaping into the fence and grabbing on, I climb until I'm standing on top of it.

"—Oh."

The distant ground enters my field of vision.

I am about to slam onto that hard surface.

Terror seizes me in an instant, and my legs go rigid. My excitement has cooled almost instantly, and now my mind is coming up with a whole litany of excuses:

Killing yourself is crazy. Get back down there and accept Mogi's feelings. It's stupid to fixate on Maria alone. What's wrong with a world where everyone besides her is happy? Just reconsider don't jump don't die don't think forget forget forget—

[illegible]

I jump off the fence as hard as I can.

I float across the crimson sky, and I picture it.

I picture myself leaping over the world.

For a moment, a crack appears in this supposedly flawless realm. The darkness I can glimpse beyond it is proof that this place is false. It lasts for only an instant, though. The world quickly conceals the darkness as if nothing happened.

What awaits after that is reality, and I'm plunging downward headfirst.

I slam into the coldhearted, unrelenting, merciless ground.

Splat.

With the sound of my skull and everything in it being crushed, my consciousness—

13,189th Time

—stays.

My brains should be spilling out after my fall, but I find myself lying on the floor of the classroom. My classmates are bustling around in preparation for the school festival.

Sitting up, I set the alto recorder in my hand on the floor.

“Ah, ngh...”

My heart is beating wildly; the scene from just a second ago is burned into my mind. Nervous sweat is pouring down my face. I feel as if I'm about to start puking my guts out at any moment.

I never want to go through something like that again. But...I get the feeling I'm probably going to be doing something very similar many times from here on out.

After all—

"It worked."

—I held on to my memory.

That is the bare minimum for fighting back against this world. I mean, if I forget, then I'll only end up enjoying the day of the festival again. I'll become a cog in the machine of this meaningless realm.

To prevent this, I'm essentially going to have to commit suicide.

I stand up unsteadily and place my elbows on the desks covered with a tablecloth, letting them support my weight.

O absorbed me quite some time ago. It's already way in the past, and I can't remember exactly when. My recollections are faint and hazy, more like a scene from a movie than events that actually happened to me. I have repeated today—the day of the festival—and its blissful illusion for a long while.

Unlike before with the Rejecting Classroom, I have no grasp of how many loops I've been through. I was able to confirm where I was back then because of Maria, who had held on to her memory and could tell me how many times it had been.

It's possible I've repeated this same day over ten thousand times. It's possible the world itself has started to bleed into me. If it has, I can't tell.

I've lost all sense of the real world. I can't tell the difference between this one and the one that is true. I'm sure it's a miracle that I even noticed I'm in a time loop.

If I don't retain my memories, then somewhere along the way, I'm sure my doubts toward this place will eventually fade. If that happens, then I'll go through the delightful day of the school festival over and over—ten thousand times, a million times, ten billion times.

This endless day will repeat and repeat and repeat and repeat and repeat and

repeat and repeat and repeat and repeat and repeat and repeat and repeat and repeat and repeat and repeat and repeat and repeat and repeat and repeat and repeat and repeat and repeat until I become like a piece of gum that's still being chewed even after it's lost its flavor. I'll dissolve and disappear down a dark throat.

—How is that any different from death?

“Ungh, ah—”

Fear.

I'm afraid that all meaning will be painted over and bleached away, and I'll lose any value.

And at some point, I won't even know to be afraid.

“Ngh...!!”

Driven by this fear, I lunge out of the classroom.

I can hear Kokone's voice calling for me to stop, but I can't let it bother me. I have to put an end to this looping world.

Well, I was able to escape from the school as the festival excitement grew, but I quickly come to a halt. I have nowhere to go. I don't even have anything that might look like a clue.

With the Rejecting Classroom, there was the goal of finding the owner. This time, though, there is no owner to seek out. I have been pulled into O—in other words, I'm a part of the Misbegotten Happiness, so if there is an owner, then it would be Maria.

But she doesn't exist in this world. There's no point in searching for her.

“Still—”

This world *is* connected to Maria, so it wouldn't be too crazy if there were some leads to be found somewhere.

“I will find the traces of Maria in this world.”

If I can track those down, then I should discover the beginnings of how to

undo this.

I run to several places around town, and my first stop is the apartment where Maria used to live. The room is empty, just like it is in the real world. Naturally, nothing smells like peppermint, either. I search for quite a bit, but when no clues turn up, I decide to make a circuit of places I visited in the real world with Maria.

Parks, arcades, karaoke parlors, hospitals, amusement parks, family restaurants, coffee shops, barbecue eateries—but not one of them offers up a single hint of her.

There's no finding them in this world.

In the end, all I've done is run around blindly while time marches mercilessly forward and the sky begins turning red.

It's almost the same time as when I jumped off the roof. I have to pin down my memories again. I have to do something suicidal again.

I don't know where the loop cuts off. If I miss the time of my jump from the last time, it's not crazy to think that my memories will vanish once more.

I have to jump again by the time I did before!

I don't want to die, so throwing myself off a roof is strange and terrifying. Of course it is.

But I don't have any choice.

There's no reason to believe that I have to jump, or that it has to happen in the same place as last time. All the same, I head to the roof of the school again.

I pass through the gate and head toward the school building, but before I can get there, someone I know stops me.

"Hosshi!"

It's Haruaki. Eyebrows raised, he approaches me, pushing a wheelchair.

"Where the hell have you been?! You were supposed to take care of Kasumi today! I know you were looking forward to it! So what gives?!"

He's justifiably angry.

“I-it’s okay, Haruaki... I’m sure he had a good reason.”

Mogi’s words are kind, but she can’t entirely hide her disappointment.

—Mogi. I want to explore the festival together without a care in the world, too. I want to see your smile up close... But I can’t.

This world is just a stage; I can’t let it drag me in. If I succumb to the temptation, I’ll be trapped in this cycle forever.

Suppressing my feelings, I ask her, “Do you know Maria? Maria Otonashi?”

“...What’re you even talking about at a time like this, Hosshi? Who is that?”
There’s a threatening note in Haruaki’s tone.

“Does that person have something to do with why you weren’t here today?”

As I thought, neither of them knows who Maria is.

“Ah...urk...!”

It’s more than I can take. I turn my back on the two of them and run toward the roof.

I have to jump right now. I need to jump right now! I have to die!

What did I find so unbearable?

The two of them didn’t know Maria. I couldn’t sense any trace of her presence from them. But that’s fine. I expected as much.

Then why am I so shocked? Why am I so upset? Why am I in so much pain? Why am I panicking; why am I fleeing?

Nothing felt off or wrong. They don’t know Maria; that should feel strange to me, but it doesn’t. I can think of Maria only as if she were a character from a fictional story, an entity from a world I have no means of interacting with.

As the sole person who has any recollection of Maria, I’m the obvious imposter here.

That’s when I realize something.

Maria.

What were you like again?

All that time must have really done a number on me for me to be on the verge of forgetting her. This pleasant, false time is already applying just enough pressure to crush me under it.

If I'm going to forget Maria this late in the game—then why persist in this lonely struggle?

"Huff...huff...huff..."

Spurring my legs into action to drive away my doubts, I sprint to the rooftop.

I open the door to see a world dyed red. There's no time left.

"I love you, Kazu."

This world is wonderful. I want to stay here.

But I shake my head furiously. I won't lose my way. I don't want to lose my way. I must not lose my way. Not giving myself time to hesitate, I climb the chain-link fence and stand atop it.

I fall.

I flip upside down, and the contents of my head splatter.

13,190th Time

Back in the classroom in the morning, I confirm I still have my memory and stand up.

But a wave of dizziness immediately washes over me. My hands are trembling when I press them to my forehead. Jumping to my own death is inflicting some deep psychological wounds.

—How long can I keep doing this?

I shake my head to get rid of the weakness. I can't think anymore. Show one opening in my heart, and this repeating world will instantly carry me away.

"...Okay."

Let's investigate the school from top to bottom this time. I'll walk around and

thoroughly question everyone who ever interacted with Maria in any way.

I'm sure I'll be in even more trouble for ignoring Mogi than I was last time, since I'm sticking around school. All the same, I will see it through... I will see it through.

“—Ha...”

I can see the red sky as I rest against the door of the roof. Another day ends without a single lead.

I broke Mogi's heart and interrogated my classmates until they snapped at me, and this is all I have to show for it. None of them had heard of Maria, and I didn't find any information connected to her, either.

“—Heh, ha-ha.”

All I can do is force myself to laugh. I'm totally wiped out. Perhaps not getting any sleep in all these successive loops is having an effect, because my brain is exhausted, and I can't walk straight. I want to take a break. I don't want to think about anything. I want to run. I want to run away. I want to go back to the day when I just had fun at the festival with Mogi. Once is enough.

But I can't.

If I taste that sweet world again, I'll lose the will to resist this repetition.

So I have to jump again.

Kill myself.

“.....I really am insane.”

—What the hell kind of logic is this? Why do I have to keep hurting myself over and over again? Is what I'm trying to accomplish really worth it?

I plunge from the rooftop without thinking any further.

Splat. The contents of my head splatter again.

13,191st Time

My memories stay with me, but I remain on the floor of the classroom, unable to get to my feet. Something is telling me I have to, but my mind and body won't connect. I want some hope, even if it's as tiny as a grain of sand. Even the glimmer of a miniature light bulb. I want some forward progress—a single step.

My body is heavy as lead as I force myself to my feet.

This time yields no fruit, either.

I collapse onto my back on the rooftop. No one knows of Maria. There isn't a trace of her to be found here.

“Ngh...ngh...”

I'm crying. I don't want to jump anymore. I don't want to have these painful thoughts anymore. I don't want to see Mogi so sad. I hate all of it.

I can't give up, though, so I jump. *Splat*. The contents of my head spill across the ground.

Just kill me!

13,192nd Time

But it continues. My memory continues. I brought this suffering on myself, but I'm suffering all the same, and I start screaming right there in the classroom. Everyone's staring, but I just can't take this anymore.

“Dammit... Dammit,” I spit like a curse, wiping away my tears after I've finished sobbing for a while. “I won't give up.”

I will never, ever give up.

13,201st Time

I gaze at the red sky from the roof.

How many times have I repeated the same day? Probably still only around

ten.

I've already run out of things to do. There's nothing of Maria to be found anywhere.

I am trapped within this repeating world. No way out.

What exactly is it that I'm supposed to do? Do I still have to keep fighting? Is it wrong to lose the memories I've kept from before? Haven't I tried hard enough? Can't I just rest now?

My thoughts are attacking me in an attempt to make me accept my fate. The assault is ongoing, never-ending. All I can think about is running away.

But I'm already trapped in the snare. I don't know if what I'm doing means anything; I don't know if it's right. But I am still bound by my fixation on bringing Maria back into my normal life.

I jump.

The contents of my head splatter.

Ah-ha-ha, I bet soon my head will be too empty to splatter, huh?

13,445th Time

I've made the leap over 250 times now. Died over 250 times. When I look down from the roof, I can see the bonfire below. The Oklahoma Mixer is so far away. I can't see the point.

I stopped thinking quite a while ago. It was becoming a nuisance.

It's rare to even have meaningful words pop into my head as they are now.

But I jump from the roof. I add another dead me to that invisible mountain of corpses.

I'm no longer considering why.

Splat, splat.

14,590th Time

Who's Maria?

I jump.

Splat, splat.

14,688th Time

Corpses. Five hundred of them.

Kazuki Hoshino is a machine that leaps to its own demise.

14,888th Time

[illegible]

15,233rd Time

“ ”

18,900th Time

“ ”

22,000th Time

“ ”

26,000th Time

“

”

27,500th Time

“

”

27,756th Time

“Ah...? Oh?”

Words suddenly return to me as I look at the red sky from the roof.

“...The sunset.”

I have no idea how many days it's been since the last time this happened. The setting sun and the act of jumping have become meaningless phenomena in my mindless haze.

“It's pretty.” It's a miracle I can feel something so normal. I don't know how many school festivals have gone by. I don't have any recent memories, either.

Now, for a moment, I'm human again.

I'm sure it really is just a fluke, though, and if I let it slip by, then I'll revert from a human back to a thing. A pointless thing that automatically watches the sunset and jumps off a roof.

Yes... I must make a decision. I've taken my own life time and time again to escape the days of repetition. However, all I've done is imprison myself in a

different cycle. I'm trapped, and I have to accept this outcome. I have to make the decision to stop these empty iterations.

I have to stop jumping.

I have to give up on her.

—Are you okay with that?

The question comes from who I once was, from someone who was once obsessed solely with bringing her back to his normal life and who has now been reduced to a shell. He's the culprit who took away my mind. He's the one who makes me jump.

—Are you okay with that?

I'm not. I want to save myself. I want to save her. I'm sure she was once more important to me than anything. I once thought I had to rescue her, even if meant sacrificing my life and the lives of everyone else.

And yet...

And yet—

—what was her name again?

The cycle of days has blotted out her face. If that was my enemy's plan, then I fell for it hook, line, and sinker. I'm going to forget about her in the enormity of time. I won't be able to save her, and if I did, it would be meaningless.

I am completely and utterly defeated.

"But that's okay...right?"

I've fought enough. I don't recall how many days I've looped through, but the number is terrifyingly high. It has to be on par with the Rejecting Classroom in the past. Continue this futile struggle, and it'll only break me.

...No, I broke a long time ago.

If I don't erase my memories of this fight, the lunatic I've become will never disappear.

I know this, but my legs won't let me walk away from the rooftop. They're just waiting for an opening to take me up on the fence and jump. It's in my nature

now.

Don't be stupid! Quit getting in the way! Hitting my thighs over and over, I make them stop. *This is as far as it goes! Listen! Give it up!* Once they finally hurt so much that they can hardly lift themselves, they finally break their habit of willfully seeking death.

"Huff...huff..."

Dragging my heavy legs, I force myself away from the roof and descend the steps one by one, breathing raggedly.

"...Let's go back."

Think of something fun.

"...Let's go back."

Think of Mogi's face.

"Let's go back...and have fun at the school festival."

I head toward a world of happiness. I don't care that it's fake.

I leave the entrance and make for the schoolyard. I can see the flames of the bonfire. I can hear "Turkey in the Straw."

Yeah, it's been so long since I've been back to the festival.

If—if I really have returned, then I have to go to Mogi. I have to tell her what I could never bring myself to say before.

That will be my farewell to the girl whose name I can't remember.

My legs grow lighter and lighter, as if my resolve dispelled the curse that turned them to lead. My heart that had frozen over in the void is warming up again, a little bit at a time.

And in the center of my heart is the face of the girl I love.

"Kazu...?" When I arrive at the fire, the girl in the wheelchair spots me and rolls closer.

"What happened today?"

"That wasn't like you; are you okay? You look pale."

“...If you’re up to it, maybe we can at least enjoy the bonfire?” She does her best to put on a smile as she reaches out to me gently.

It’s not that she isn’t hurt. She had been looking forward to this day more than anything, and I broke my promise.

“.....I’m sorry.”

“Huh...? I-it’s okay. I know you probably had something to do...”

“I’m sorry!” I can’t hold back the tears anymore.

“U-um...it was just today, so you don’t need to apologize so much...”

It wasn’t just today. I have neglected Mogi and this world all this time. Everything I’ve done has been for the girl whose name I forgot, not Mogi.

I’ve been betraying the Mogi of this world.

I’ve made up my mind to live in this world now. The events here aren’t phenomena that vanish into nothingness but a collection of precious moments. I can never dismiss them again.

I can never kill myself again.

“I love you, Kazu.”

I can never again pretend Mogi’s confession didn’t happen.

Her confession of love has been influencing me this entire time. It stirred and changed my heart, even when it was filled with thoughts of the girl whose name I can’t remember.

I came to love Mogi more and more.

Just as I did in another repeating world.

The cycles will wash that girl away.

Brushing away my tears, I take Mogi by her delicate shoulders.

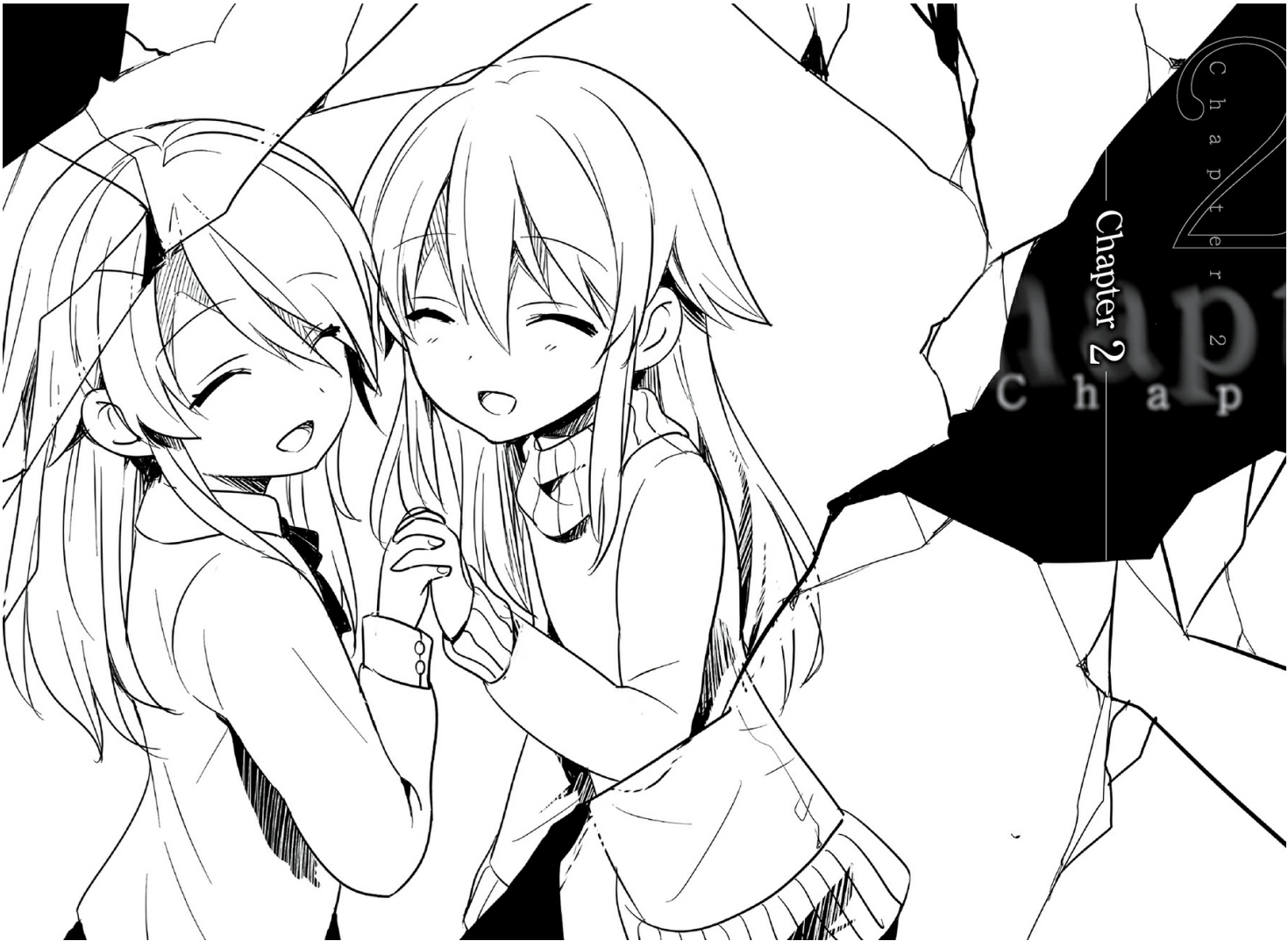
“K-Kazu...?”

Now I can respond.

“I love you, Kasumi Mogi.”

Thus, my long, long struggle comes to end.

If only it had been so easy.



I don't know this street.

It's a nondescript commercial strip that's lost its hustle and bustle to the big shopping malls. What was the name of this place again? ...I guess it doesn't matter. This is my battle alone, so wherever this is won't affect me.

In this middle of this barren shopping street, a boy in a school uniform, Yukito Tejima, has collapsed. The unconscious boy clutches a dress-up doll like the ones little girls play with.

"His and Her Mirrored Terminus."

The Box had granted Tejima's wish for "a world for only him and the girl of his dreams." He had desired a world in which just two people existed: himself, and a high school girl one grade above him named Suzu Amemiya. But Boxes also fulfill any beliefs that a wish could never be. Tejima believed his wish could never come true and knew in his heart that Suzu Amemiya wouldn't want to live in a world alone with him. Even worse, though Tejima had asked for solitude, deep inside, he didn't really want it.

Putting his half-baked wish into the Box had earned him His and Her Mirrored Terminus, a labyrinth of mirrors. Tejima had merely managed to trap himself in a reflective maze along with life-size dolls of Suzu Amemiya that only said things he wanted to hear.

I entered that world and wandered the maze of mirrors alongside the dolls. With no leads on a solution, I became trapped for longer than I expected. When I became desperate, I began smashing mirrors indiscriminately in lieu of an actual plan, and I finally broke through. The rules of the labyrinth fell apart. I found Tejima within, persuaded him first with words and then with force, and removed the Box.

While only a day had passed in the real world, the time I spent within the Box felt closer to a year. If I said I wasn't exhausted, I'd be lying.

On a side note, Tejima and Suzu Amemiya weren't actually in a relationship. Despite Tejima's feelings, Suzu Amemiya merely saw him as a boy from the year below hers whom she had spoken to before. She is pretty, I'll give her that, but Suzu Amemiya is shallow and mediocre—a far cry from the picture-perfect girl I

saw in the maze.

The Box has a dull sheen, as if someone covered it in origami foil paper, and it's about the size of a trash can. I drop it on the ground and crush it beneath my foot. It shatters easily with no resistance.

Now I'm back at square one.

"You weren't able to obtain a Box this time, either." The one who spoke appears out of nowhere, and I glare at them.

"O."

O's current guise is Yukito Tejima's father, but that bewitching smile gives them away.

"Don't you think it's time you threw in the towel? You're never going to find another unused Box, and even if you did, you wouldn't be able to use it properly."

"Maybe so, but that doesn't matter. I will continue my search. Then I will finally make Misbegotten Happiness into something complete. I will bring joy to everyone in the world."

"Even if that means sacrificing yourself?"

"Yes, that's right. Because I am—"

"Aya Otonashi."

O finishes my sentence with contempt and vanishes with a scornful laugh.

I don't recall when this game of tag began. I remember only what's happened recently.

So even if there are important memories among the ones I have forgotten, I wouldn't be able to reach them.

For example—

"—Oh."

Someone's name is on the tip of my tongue, and that lone, fleeting spark ignites a slowly growing warmth deep in my chest.

But it quickly disappears.

Yes, it doesn't matter to me anymore anyway. Even if I did become close to someone in the past, it doesn't matter that I can't remember. By now, they would have found someone else and forgotten all about me.

"I—"

—am alone.

Ever since that day, I have always been alone.

Still fatigued, I stumble into a room in a business hotel and collapse right onto the bed, but I can't sleep.

My head hurts as if someone's pounding it with a hammer. I've taken a lot of damage in my long fight against the Boxes, and even now it feels as if someone is trying to kick their way out of me. If I were to scream, the emptiness would come flying out of my throat like a monster coming to devour me.

I'm at my limit.

I have been for a while.

Practically crawling, I take some scented oil from my bag and cover a tissue in it.

It smells like peppermint.

Oddly enough, this fragrance allows me to fall asleep. I guess my body remembers that it calms me, at the very least.

My consciousness falls away.

And I arrive in the past that I can recall only in dreams.



My older sister, Aya Otonashi, was a prophet.

She would know the culprit of whodunit dramas before ten minutes had passed. She could guess what our housekeeper, Yoshida, would be serving for dinner that day. She could tell who my classmates were going to go out with. She even guessed that her homeroom teacher would resign.

Every time one of her predictions proved correct, she became more of an idol to me. In my mind, they were wondrous and strange, downright magical. What's more, my enchantress sister was more intelligent and beautiful than anyone.

I had nothing that made me special, so I took pride in having such a perfect older sister.

The thing is—Aya also made a prediction about me. An extremely ominous prediction.

It happened when I was twelve, in the winter. It was an extremely cold day, and the gusts of powerful wind rattled the windows of our mansion. As soon as I got home from school, I didn't even take my coat off but ran to Aya's room, where I knew it would be warm. As I had thought, her heater had made the room almost too hot, and I relaxed in the warmth and the usual scent—a mix of perfume and essential oils.

The scents weren't ones you'd expect to find together, but they blended perfectly into a fragrance that left my beloved sister's touch on the place.

Unlike my featureless room, here the furnishings were too luxurious for a child's space. The chandelier and large antique mirror were like something out of a fantasy world. The drama of the room suited my sister, though.

Aya was sitting on her canopied bed as I took off my coat, but she was watching me with an oddly stern expression. When I cocked my head in confusion, she said, "I want you to listen to me for a moment." It seemed strange to me, but I sat on the chair in front of her.

When Aya's grim look softened into a smile, she stood up and embraced my head. Then she told me as clearly as she could, "I'm going to make a prediction about your future."

She removed her arms from around my head.

My sister had predicted all sorts of things before now, but that was the first time it had to do with me. I was startled, but I could still feel myself sitting up a little straighter.

Aya peered into my eyes, then delivered her prophecy.

“You’re going to become me—no, you have to.”

I was too stunned to say anything.

“That means you’ll have to become someone who makes others happy.”

“I’m going to become you? But then what’s going to happen to you?”

My sister hesitated a little at my question, but there was no doubt in her eyes when she answered.

“Maria, I’m going to set out on a journey when I’m fourteen.”

And indeed, Aya was fourteen years old when she died. It was her birthday. She died in a traffic accident, along with our parents.

I was the only one left, so that her prophecy would be fulfilled to the letter.

Since then, I have been living as Aya Otonashi, just as she foretold.



I first met Aya not when I was born, but in the spring when I was four.

I remember the day well.

“Hey...why is everyone lining up?” I asked.

My mother only smiled. Everyone in our household, including the housekeeper, had formed a line in front of the entrance. This was a first for me, so I gripped my mother’s hand uneasily.

My father’s Benz passed through the front gate and stopped right before me. Then a young girl climbed out of the back seat.

When she saw all of us, her cheeks lifted in a hint of a smile, and she bowed. “How do you do?”

Though there was nothing special about the gesture, I was thoroughly shocked. She was around the same height and age as me, and yet my intuition told me this girl was an entirely different sort of creature. Her face was the definition of perfect, and she had slender limbs and fair skin like snow.

Even more extraordinary than Aya’s appearance was the aura surrounding her. She was only four years old, and yet around her was an air of both ethereal

transience and world-weariness (I didn't know the words at the time, of course). I had never seen a girl like her before, and I was so overwhelmed, I hid behind my mother.

As I did, my mother said to me, "Your older sister is going to live with us starting today."

Live with us? This person? Is that even possible?

When I looked around, I noticed my mother and everyone else were in a welcoming mood. If anything, they all seemed to like this girl and her proper manners that were beyond her years. Maybe she seemed so odd to me because we were the same age; if she were older, would they still notice?

Aya may have made a perfect impression on everyone aside from me, but that impression changed soon enough when my father got out of the driver's seat so our family chauffeur could put the car in the garage. She turned to him and said, "Will you get down on your knees and bow to the ground?" She sounded far too mature for a child.

Father thought it was a joke at first. Anyone would assume it was just a four-year-old girl being silly.

But Aya insisted, more forcefully this time. "We deserve an apology. You stripped me away from my mother because of your infidelity. You're making my new mother raise me. You're making my sister live with an older sibling from a different mother. So you're going to get on your knees and bow."

She looked Father in the eyes, all but saying that those were her terms for becoming a member of this household. Once he understood it wasn't a joke, Father was naturally confused. But they were just the antics of a four-year-old. He didn't have to listen to her.

"Get on your knees and bow."

Except he did.

There was no room for levity when Aya was this serious. One misstep here, and she would never trust the concept of family again. I could feel it. Everyone there could feel it.

It seems strange now, looking back, but everyone was thinking the same thing.

—Father bowing down was the only correct answer.

He placed his knees on the ground and lowered his head.

“...I’m sorry.”

It was unbelievable. He was an executive at a major financial company; he normally never had to humble himself, but here he was prostrating himself at his four-year-old daughter’s feet in front of his family and servants. His face contorted with shame before her.

“Thank you. Now I can stay here.”

That isn’t to say that incident alone was enough to cost my father his dignity. From that day forward, Aya was a generally obedient daughter who listened to her father and didn’t go out of her way to injure his pride.

Thinking back on it, though, she was the one who became the head of the house on that day.

I think she took up the reins of control, and ever since, our household acted according to her whims.

Part of the reason our parents doted on Aya so much was also her sympathetic situation.

My family consisted of four people: my father, Michishige; my mother, Yukari; my older sister, Aya; and me, Maria. Aya and I were sisters with different mothers, and our birthdays were only three months apart.

Michishige’s (I imitated my mother and Aya in calling him by his first name) first wife, Yoriko, died of an illness, and five years later, he married Rinko, a former celebrity and Aya’s birth mother. He probably fell for her incomparable beauty. She was so lovely that people would question whether it was fair to call her human like the rest of us on Earth; any man would be mesmerized.

But their life soon fell apart. Rinko wasn’t the housewife type, and she didn’t love Michishige, either (according to him). He chose to find solace outside the home, and he cheated on her with Yukari, who had just finished high school and

joined my father's financial firm as a receptionist. She became pregnant not long after, but Aya had also been in Rinko's womb for three months by then.

With an adulterous husband, Rinko easily agreed to a divorce once she was certain she would receive enough compensation and child support to live. She assumed custody of the newborn Aya, Michishige married my mother, and I came into the world.

Apparently, Michishige and Rinko didn't cut off all contact after the divorce, and he had been visiting Aya with the permission of my mother (Yukari). Then, when Aya was four, Rinko demanded that Michishige take custody.

He accepted immediately, probably because he had received word from other sources that Aya was being borderline neglected.

Aya didn't speak of Rinko much. Still, she did once jokingly tell me, "She used to say she wished I'd never been born."

I met Rinko only a handful of times, so I don't know if she actually meant it.

But judging by her circumstances, Aya was what society would consider an "unfortunate child."

That's probably why my parents worked so hard to make sure she didn't feel that way. While they were fairly strict in disciplining her, she still had it much easier than I did. They gave Aya a gorgeous room, bought her favorite toys, and always let her pick first when we got cake. We were also sent to separate schools to avoid any unwanted rumors.

It would be a lie to say that the unequal treatment didn't upset me when I was little. But I also just accepted it as the way things were.

After all, my mother always told me she was truly glad I was born.

She never got tired of telling me.

"You brought Michishige and me together. You're my little angel."

I was so proud every time she said that to me.

If I hadn't been inside Mother, Michishige might have ended his relationship with her instead of with Rinko. He often told us that my mother's profound love had mellowed him, reformed him. From my viewpoint, their love was genuine,

so genuine that I hoped I could find a relationship like theirs in the future.

I was at the center of the family.

Yes.

If only that were the truth. Then none of this would have happened.



It was the first day of summer break during my first year of middle school. It was a hot day, the kind where you take a few steps down the hallway and you can already feel your underwear starting to stick to your skin. It was really gross, so I had decided to spend the middle of summer vacation under the air conditioner. I wouldn't go outside.

I was freed from the school I despised, and not even my tutor or my piano teacher would be coming today. I wanted to enjoy this moment of happiness to the fullest, so I lay down on my bed and turned on my handheld game console. I was doing *nothing* today!

That was why I didn't care when the doorbell rang. It wasn't for me anyway. I didn't exactly have any friends who would drop by out of the blue.

But a knock still came on the door of my room. I could tell who it was by the sound.

"Aya?"

I got up from my bed. When I opened the door, it was exactly whom I expected, and she was wearing a well-made white dress.

At thirteen, Aya was no longer called "cute." She was beautiful, even bewitching—one look at her face would make people sigh. If you examined her closely, you could find the youth of her age in her features and her physique, but the transcendental aura around her prevented people from focusing on this.

"Was that doorbell for me? Was there a package or something?"

"No, it was my guest."

When I tilted my head at her response, Aya started stroking my long hair

fondly. I had grown it out so that my hair could be like hers, at least. It made me happy to have her touch it.

“Anyway, I’m going to invite my guest into my room, and I want you to be there, too.”

“Huh? You want me to meet them?”

It was the first time Aya had said anything like that to me. Partly because we went to different schools, we didn’t have any mutual friends... Also because I didn’t have any friends to begin with.

“That’s right. I need you to see what happens next.”

“...What do you mean?”

Perhaps because an explanation would take too long, Aya didn’t say anything else and took my hand, leading me from my room whether I wanted to go or not. I was used to my older sister’s forceful ways, so I quickly gave in and let her do what she wanted.

“Oh yeah, I have one of those predictions you like so much,” she said, turning around as we walked down the hallway. “Someone will swallow Ramune.”

I cocked my head again. I didn’t have a clue what was up with her today. When I asked her what she meant, she smiled and said nothing.

“You are always leading me— Eek!”

“Hmm? What’s wrong?”

I looked away and merely pointed. Aya grinned at the eight-legged creature.

“C’mon, it’s just a spider,” she said, picking up the big guy in her bare hand as if it were nothing.

She peered at it and watched it scuttle across her palm intently.

“I—I can’t believe you’re okay with that...”

“Hmm? It’s not like it can do anything to us. If you look closely enough, it’s actually cute. It’s like it’s trying to be endearing.”

With that said, my sister smiled gently and—

“—Oh.”

—squished the spider in her hand.

“...Why?” I looked into her eyes in shock.

“Because I didn’t give it permission to be here,” Aya replied.

While I had braced myself for whomever I’d find in Aya’s room, it turned out to be an ordinary boy who looked out of place among her opulent furniture. He wasn’t ugly, just so very average and commonplace compared with my sister.

However, the look on his face was quite grave. He had distinctly dark circles under his eyes, indicating he had not been sleeping well.

“Hello.”

Trying to hide his fatigue, he smiled and greeted me in a crisp, clear voice. He was a student at Aya’s private school, so he must have had a good upbringing.

But I stared at the floor without returning the greeting. Nothing about him put me off or anything; sadly enough, I still didn’t how to interact with boys my age even though I was in middle school.

He turned back to Aya, seemingly unoffended. “Here’s what you asked for.”

“Thanks.”

He handed Aya something that looked like a notebook, then glanced at me.

“Um, Aya, why did you ask your little sister to come here?”

“It’s fine. She won’t do anything.”

“...You don’t have a problem with letting her hear about this?”

“Of course not.”

Still, the boy’s eyes kept darting nervously my way. I *was* an outsider; I guess it was only natural.

...I couldn’t stand being there. I wanted to go back to my room and play games.

“Yeah. In fact, I want you to tell my sister about our situation.”

“...How much does she know about what’s going on at school?”

“Nothing.”

“Nothing... So start from the beginning?”

Aya nodded.

Apparently, Aya wasn't going to introduce the boy to me. I also got the feeling he wasn't interested in me beyond the fact that I was Aya's younger sister. Seriously, why did she bring me there?

“I'm going to explain to you what's happening at our school now.” This boy whose name I didn't know turned his body toward me and spoke slowly. I was getting nervous, having a boy look at me, and my shoulders straightened. “We have enemies.”

“...Enemies?” I repeated. That didn't sound good.

“Yes, a group of girls led by our classmate Yamashita. They are our enemies.”

I grimaced. “Enemies” was too strong a word to use for classmates. Normally, you'd just say *We don't get along*, or at most *I don't like them*. It was especially strange to hear from someone who was as well raised as he appeared to be.

“Yamashita and the others are trying to force Aya to transfer to another school. And we aren't talking about ignoring her or saying mean things. They've complained to teachers and parents, collected signatures, boycotted the classes of teachers who defend Aya, and worked to smear her reputation. We had to laugh when Yamashita ran for vice president during the student council elections and pledged to make Aya change schools, though. Anyway, what I want you to understand is that the bad blood between Aya and Yamashita and her crew isn't confined to just her class; it's school-wide.”

I had no idea. I had never heard about any of that from Aya, and she hadn't seemed troubled, either.

In fact—

I looked at my sister's face. She was still smiling, like before.

“.....”

In fact—I had actually been thinking she was in an oddly good mood these days.

“According to the other side, there’s something wrong with Year 1, Class 3, and it’s because Aya is there. She’s disturbed the order of things. Everything would be fixed if she would just leave.”

Aya shrugged. “It’s true; classes aren’t normal with me there. That’s always been the case.”

It did seem that way. Classes with my sister in them were never short of problems. There was one incident where someone became infatuated with Aya, started stalking her, and broke into our house with a knife. Her charms tended to lead people astray and cause trouble, and that was probably the most emblematic example. Being special means you have an influence on those around you.

“It’s not like Aya has done anything wrong, though! They’re the ones making things worse, but when something bad happens to them, they blame it all on her. It’s all them! They’re crazy!”

I was starting to get the picture.

It was possible that at first, Yamashita and her friends had been experiencing the usual flare-ups of jealousy: “I don’t like how all the boys are so into her”; “I can’t stand how the teachers favor her.” Then they probably banded together and let her know how they felt. Usually, when a group starts pressuring you, you eventually cave, and that’s the end of that.

But they were dealing with my sister. And Aya would never submit to anyone.

What’s more, there were a number of people willing to take her side, and as she gained more allies and enemies, the situation blew up.

Even if she were to consider backing down, the issue was already bigger than her, so it wasn’t that simple. When you have a circle of supporters around you, you can’t just retract the gauntlet you’ve thrown.

And so things got even more out of hand.

Aya had never been without an abundance of both friends and foes. She stirred up trouble wherever she went.

This time, though, she couldn’t just relax and tell herself this was business as

usual; the scale was too large. The entire school was involved in this, after all.

“It’s evil to try to make Aya change schools. She hasn’t done anything!”

Furthermore—

The madness in his eyes was real.

“I’m going to beat the crap out of every single one of them. I’ll kill ’em.”

Of course a boy would come up with that. They said stuff like that all the time.

But there was a different weight to his words. It wasn’t just talk; there was a ferocity that suggested he might actually do it.

“I’ve told you I don’t want any violence, right?”

“...But, Aya, the only way is to give it to them straight!”

“Don’t tell me you came here today to ask my permission to physically attack them?”

He lapsed into silence.

“If we resort to violence, we’ll be the ones in the wrong, no matter how just our cause may be. That’s simply how it is. We shouldn’t do it.”

“...Damn! Then what should we do?!”

He lowered his gaze and clenched his fists.

“...I want to kill them...kill them...kill them, kill them, kill them!”

I was frightened. This boy sincerely believed the people opposed to Aya should die.

This was probably the right way to describe his resolve:

Murderous.

“.....Oh.”

I tried imagining it—a classroom full of murderous hatred.

One cupful of this emotion would be enough to make you sick. It would be impossible to live out each day with that in the air. A normal life would stand no chance against that raging, blazing sword of emotion.

In which case—it was hopeless.

A violent tragedy was going to take place and soon, despite Aya's efforts to prevent it.

My body trembled.

Why did my sister want to show me this?

As their meeting continued, the boy's aberrant behavior just became more and more apparent, so can you imagine how much I wanted to run from there?

Eventually, that warped meeting came to an end, and we saw him to the front gate.

He was polite toward me the whole time and took me seriously, almost too much so. He was an extremely proper person except when it came to enemies and Aya Otonashi.

"Oh yeah. Here." As he was about to leave, Aya handed him a paper bag.

"What's this?"

"Oh, just things to help you rest, since you said you haven't been able to sleep. Some scents I recommend and other stuff. Find what works best for you. I included a note on how to use it all."

"Th... Thank you so much."

I was startled. Her gift had affected him so deeply that he was openly weeping.

His feelings toward my sister just weren't normal. It wasn't love or affection.

It was...*worship*.

I fled to my room. In an attempt to get the incident out of my mind, I burrowed into my futon and focused on my game.

But whether I wanted to or not, I knew.

There would be no more escape for me.

It was a week after the boy's visit.

Someone was shaking me awake by the shoulder. "What's up?" I asked

groggily, but Aya avoided the question and didn't explain. Instead, she began to undo the buttons of my pajamas.

After I had finished changing clothes, she led me outside the house. Aya stopped a taxi, we got in, and she gave the driver an address about one station away.

"What are we going to do there?"

She didn't answer.

After we got out of the cab, Aya surveyed the area warily, then pulled me into the parking area of an apartment building. It was as if we were hiding from something.

"Aya...tell me what's going on."

"You'll see soon."

"But, Aya—"

She put her pointer finger to her mouth and silenced me before I could yell at her. I gave up and decided to wait quietly.

I guess it was five or so minutes after that?

A group of four people stopped in front of the house near us, and their behavior was clearly suspicious. All of them were wearing black sweat suits, as if they wanted to blend into the darkness.

"...Oh."

I couldn't help but let out a little gasp. One of them was a boy wearing a cap—the same boy who had come to our house before.

And seeing him, I got a bad feeling about what was going to happen next.

"Let's do it."

"Yeah."

Two of the group kept watch while the boy in the cap and the last member moved in front of the house. They were carrying plastic containers filled with liquid, and they started splashing the walls.

A distinct, oily smell greeted my nose.

Was that...kerosene?

It can't be...

As soon as I realized, I leaned forward and peered at the nameplate on the house they were dousing in liquid.

YAMASHITA

“Aya— Mmgh...!” She covered my mouth.

Why? These people are going to commit arson. They're going to burn a house down. In the middle of the night. There are probably people inside, and the fire department might be too late. Worst case, everyone inside might die. Why won't you stop them?

As I wondered to myself, their work continued. The two in charge of the kerosene nodded at each other and pulled out newspapers. They scattered the paper along the walls and soaked those, too.

They lit their lighters. If that fire touched the newspapers—it was all over.

“...Mm-mmgh!”

What is she thinking? I wondered, but I couldn't just stand quietly by.

I pushed her hand off my mouth and yelled, “Dooooooooooooooooon't!!”

But it was too late. By the time I shouted, the newspaper had already caught fire, and the blaze was spreading.

The kerosene-soaked wooden home was instantly enveloped in flames.

All of them had heard my voice and turned in my direction. Though they seemed unsure what to do now that there were witnesses, the two who had been on watch ran as if they'd been planning to do that the entire time. The one next to the boy in the cap seemed confused, but then he took off at full speed, too.

The only one left was the hat boy.

He stared at me, wide-eyed—he recognized me as Aya's sister.

“...Why is Aya’s little sister...?”

Aya stood up and revealed herself to the panicking boy.

“...A-Aya...!”

Without saying a word to him, she pulled out her mobile phone and called 119.

Before I knew it, I was ringing the doorbell of the Yamashita household over and over. “Your house is on fire! Please run! Run!” I was screaming. I pounded on the front door as hard as I could. That still didn’t get a response, so I started ringing the bell again. Finally, I reached someone who I guess was Yamashita’s mother and urged them to escape. “Run! Please run!”

After her call was finished, Aya approached the boy with the cap.

“Hey, Aya! You need to hurry and get away from here, too! If you stay, they might think you helped!”

She let out a sigh as she watched the roaring blaze. “I’m not worried about that. My sister will vouch for me... More importantly, didn’t I tell you not to do anything violent?”

“But! If we didn’t, then...!”

His face was much more haggard than when I saw him a week ago. He was the picture of a boy on the brink.

“So you did it on my behalf. I can’t turn a blind eye to something like this; I’ll take the responsibility for explaining it.”

“That’s not your responsibility at all! We did this on our own! You didn’t have anything to do with it!”

“Unfortunately, no one is going to believe that... Haven’t you figured it out? You’ve already caused me plenty of trouble. There’s no taking it back.”

His eyes went wide with shock.

“...I—I caused you trouble...? But...!”

His voice trembled, as if he had committed the most unforgivable crime of all.

“N...nnnh...!”

He broke down sobbing.

“Waaah!!”

His wailing grew louder and louder.

“.....”

Stunned, I just watched.

What is going on here? I thought.

It creeped me out. Something was very wrong—uncomfortable, like watching someone perform when they haven’t rehearsed nearly enough.

I had known it all along.

Even though Aya could have put a stop to his crime whenever she wanted, she intentionally hadn’t. If I hadn’t yelled, she might have waited for the house to burn longer.

Meaning Aya had waited for him to make this mistake.

What was the point?

I looked at my sister.

And I gasped.

She was smiling. Sure, *that much would have been okay*. The problem, the biggest problem, was how I felt about her inappropriate expression—

—*It was mesmerizing*.

My footing became unsteady. This firelit scene was all wrong, obviously. It was out of tune. Completely out of tune with what should be.

And Aya was the one making it that way.

That incident ended the hostilities in the classroom. That was only natural, since the two at the heart of the dispute withdrew from school.

After her home partially burned down, Yamashita finally came crying to Aya, pleading for forgiveness. The boy in the cap apparently attempted suicide before the police came to his house. He tried to overdose on sleeping medicine, and he used the pills Aya had put in the paper bag for him during his visit—the

“things to help him rest,” as Aya called them.

He didn’t die, though. He didn’t even suffer. He was taken away by the police as the principal offender in the arson, bewildered as to why he was still alive.

But it was no surprise that he didn’t die after swallowing everything in the bottle. After all, the contents weren’t sleeping pills, but Ramune candies like the ones they sell in convenience stores for seventy yen.

The thing is, until Aya told him otherwise, he believed without a doubt that the bottle contained sleeping pills, because she had written that it did when she gave it to him. That was enough for him. He never questioned it.

She tricked him, and yet he came up with the convenient excuse that it was all a plan to prevent him from taking his life. He was actually grateful to Aya, the one who had pushed him into committing arson.

...Oh, that reminds me. Aya’s prediction.

“Someone will swallow Ramune.”

My sister was right once again.



In my dream, the spider created its threads and built a web. The powerful adhesive of the threads never let go of anything they caught, and the spider leisurely preyed upon the meal in its web. Its fangs had a special property, a narcotic poison that left the one being devoured hallucinating in a state of ecstasy until the very end... Oh—looking closer, the one being eaten was a person. Was it the boy in the cap? Yamashita? ...No, it wasn’t.

The one being eaten—was me.

Full of rapturous joy, I was disappearing into the spider’s stomach. As it ate my fingers, ate my legs, ate half of my head, and ate away at my insides, all I could feel was utter pleasure.

“...H-huff...huff...huff!”

I woke up.

My dreams had been like that ever since the arson. I was having nightmares

every night.

“I have to ask her...”

Why had Aya shown me that? What was the point?

There would be no escape from my nightmares until I found out. I knew this somehow.

But I couldn't work up the courage.

“N-ngh...”

I cradled my head. It throbbed with pain; maybe I hadn't been sleeping enough. When I covered my eyes with my hands, I saw Aya's face on the inside of my eyelids.

That face—*her smile that was more irresistible than anything.*

I didn't understand what lay behind it, but I did know one thing:

If I were to ask, our relationship as close sisters would be over.

It was a sultry night. Sweat beaded on my skin as soon as I left my air-conditioned room. The drastic change in temperature momentarily threw my senses for a loop, making me dizzy and out of breath.

Still, I had made up my mind to ask.

I summoned my courage and knocked on the door to Aya's room. It was the first time I had ever knocked so somberly.

My heart used to leap with excitement when I knocked on her door. I'd always loved my sister.

There was no response; I entered the room anyway.

My nose was immediately filled with the scent of several perfumes and aromatic oils. That fragrance never failed to set me at ease.

I turned to the bed. Aya was lying with her back to me in the darkness.

“Aya,” I called, and she rolled over to look at me.

Her eyes, clear like gems, gazed at me intently. It made me feel as if she could see everything inside me.

“Come here.” Aya invited me under the blankets. Before, I would have jumped right over to my beloved sister. But I didn’t move. “Maria, what’s the matter?” she asked.

“Um... Um...” I clenched my fists. “Wh-what were you trying to do?”

“...Hmm? Why did I make you watch something so awful? Is that your question?”

I nodded.

“Maria. I say this to you practically every day. I’ve been working toward a singular purpose from the moment I came here.”

“And that’s—”

My sister has a favorite phrase. She’s been saying it since she was four. Her impossibly idealistic, empty dream.

“I want to make everyone in the world happy.”

Every single word from her mouth was what I had expected.

I shook my head.

“I don’t get it at all... What you did was the exact opposite of making people happy...right?”

“It might seem that way on the surface... But, Maria. You don’t know what happened to my class afterward, do you?”

“Huh?”

“The normal routine of my class had been disrupted. There was a conflict with me at the center, and everyone was upset in some way. I’m sure all my classmates were miserable. Those negative feelings swallowed up the entire school. The problem was no longer something they could leave for someone else to deal with. They couldn’t ignore it anymore. They had to keep thinking about that question: Why did the school end up this way?”

I knew the answer that came next.

“Because I made it that way.”

Yes, exactly. The problem had gotten as big as it had because my sister had

intentionally fanned the flames.

“But that huge problem was solved in a single stroke by this latest incident. The students can finally breathe again now that they’re free of this massive headache.”

Aya smiled gently.

“Everyone matured a great deal in facing the issue. I doubt they’ll be making the same mistakes again. This mess around me brought them happiness and will help them find more in the days to come.”

I imagined a classroom with the students and even the teacher standing around Aya, smiling unconvincingly.

...I didn’t know if I would call that happiness.

Either way, there was still the problem before that.

“But you made that boy in the hat unhappy by doing this, didn’t you? And not just him—probably lots of other people, too.”

“I helped many more people than I hurt, but you do make a valid point. Given that my goal is to bring joy to everyone in the world, I would prefer to not make victims of anyone. But I’m too inept to do it any other way.”

“Are you saying that burning homes down and making people commit crimes are ‘acceptable sacrifices’?!”

“Sacrifices are never acceptable, but if they will bring happiness to many people, then that’s what I will choose.”

“That’s crazy... That’s crazy...!”

A normal person wouldn’t be able to make that choice. My sister lacked empathy. She was completely wrong.

“What’s crazy about it? Try to explain. If I can make a hundred people happy by sacrificing ten, then I will, even if I don’t like it. That’s all I’m saying, see?”

“B-but...it’s not right!”

It was undoubtedly wrong, I was positive; and yet, I wasn’t able to put a good counterargument into words. All I could do was shake my head and say “That’s

crazy, that's crazy" like a child throwing a tantrum.

"Well... I mean, come on! There have to be other ways... Like, I can't come up with them now, but as smart as you are, I'm sure you can find something better... Like, can't you find a way to make people happy with good feelings, like the trust and goodwill people have toward you?"

"I already did that in elementary school."

"Huh?"

"As a result, I understood that simply giving people what they want just makes them happy for a little while, and it affects only a few people."

"...I have a hard time imagining that."

"I'm sure you do, if I merely describe it. There's no other way—open the drawer of my desk. The very top one."

I was too terrified to move, though. After all, I knew that whatever was in there would destroy my sense of values.

Seeing me standing frozen, Aya stood up. She turned on the lights of the chandelier, then opened the top drawer of the desk.

She took what appeared to be a notebook from it and handed it to me. It was the one the boy in the cap had given her when he came to the house. "I had him do a bit of breaking and entering." She laughed wryly. That wasn't enough to surprise me anymore.

The notebook had *Diary* written on it.

"Go on—read it."

I knew nothing good was coming, but I obeyed and began to read.

Society would never let me be with the girl I love.

The diary began with that sentence. While the name of the person the author was in love with was never written, I could tell it was Aya. And the diary was almost completely filled with things about my sister.

How he was in love from the moment he saw her. How he decided he couldn't tell her. How he was unable to repress his feelings when Aya came to

him and gave him hope: “You’ve always got your eye on me.” How excited he was when she defied his expectations and agreed to a date. How the date couldn’t have gone any better. How he was prepared to care for her for the rest of his life. How he confessed his feelings to her, and they officially started going out. His observations on love. Embarrassingly bad poems.

After reading all of that, I was thoroughly appalled. This blind love was so unnerving. The owner of this diary paid more attention to Aya than anyone else, yet he understood her least of all. It was as if he had built a character for a pretty doll named Aya.

And to top it off, I already knew what happened next.

“Maria,” Aya softly said to me. “I could make this one man happy. But if I did, I could never make the rest of the world happy, too.”

The mood of the diary took an ominous turn.

Aya’s attitude turned cold in their relationship. His affection for her somehow became common knowledge in class. It became a major issue during a staff meeting. No one in class would give him the time of day anymore. The rumors had come from Aya herself.

The once-neat text in the diary became messy. His fury was spilling over.

Once again, he pleaded for a relationship so that they could get married, but he was given the cold shoulder. His profession of love had been recorded, and his proposal to an elementary schooler spread through the class. The students, their parents and guardians, his colleagues, and everyone greeted him with looks of disgust whenever they encountered him. He was practically asked to resign. His parents disowned him.

He broke into our home.

This diary documented the love of Aya’s teacher when she was in sixth grade. The final line was written in a scrawl:

I will kill Aya Otonashi.

Whatever this sickening feeling in the diary was, it was something far more than rage. I hadn’t known much about the breakin, but this raw depiction of it

was hitting me hard.

However, it was difficult to simply blame that person.

After all, Aya had made a prediction:

“My teacher will resign.”

Meaning—as an elementary schooler, Aya had manipulated her teacher and driven him to this.

“...Wh-why would you do something like that?!”

“I was trying to make him happy. If you actually look at the diary, you can see that he seems pleased enough in the beginning, right? But he wanted to keep me all to himself. He didn’t like that I was working to make others happy. I wouldn’t have been able to bring happiness to others if things had gone the way he wanted. That was out of the question. It went against my mission. He was deluded; he believed that no one would ever love me but him. Severing ties with him was difficult. I had to reject him forcefully; there was no other way.”

Aya shook her head slightly.

“And as you can see, it clearly failed, but it also gave me a sense of the similarities between love and hate. I learned that if I could take advantage of them, I could manipulate others more effectively. So this time, I took the roundabout method, using hatred in lieu of dealing directly with a single person. The outcome was the best so far... That said, it was still far from perfect. It’s nowhere close to what I want to achieve. Nevertheless, I won’t stop walking this path.”

She pressed her lips together in determination.

“I’ll keep thinking of ways to make everyone in the world happy.”

And with that, she smiled.

Yeah.

I understood. Why would I think then, as I do now, that her smile was more beautiful, more bewitching, than anything?

The answer—

—was that Aya was nothing short of a saint.

Some might ask in what way. She had sacrificed people and didn't even always get the results she wanted. And she wasn't exactly humane.

And yet, she wasn't in it for herself, not at all.

Aya had cast aside her own interests in the pursuit of bringing joy to people across the planet.

That stance was genuinely beautiful.

Oh...what was wrong with me? Why did I feel that way?

"I understand now what you're thinking...maybe. But you still haven't answered my question."

"Yeah, that's true. I haven't explained the demonstration. But didn't I make that prediction earlier?"

That prediction.

"You're going to become me—no, you have to."

I trembled as I considered what it meant.

Aya gently pressed her fingertip to my lips. "You will live for the happiness of people around the world, just like I do. So I wanted to teach you my way of doing things."

Me? I'd do what my sister did? Set aside my own desires, my feelings, and live to bring joy to the people of the world?

"I—I could never do that."

I wasn't superhuman like Aya. I was just a weak child; I had so much trouble adjusting to elementary and middle school that I'd barely squeaked by.

"It's not a question of possibility. You can't fight your destiny."

"Wh-why?! You should be more than enough by yourself, right? Don't drag me into this, too!"

Aya let out a sigh at my fierce resistance. "...I was unsure whether to bring it up, but it looks like I can't avoid the topic."

“Wh-what...?”

“I’m truly glad you were born,” Aya said. “You brought Michishige and me together. You are my little angel.”

My mother had said that to me over and over. Those words had sustained me all my life.

“Wh-what does that have to do with anything...? Why are you saying that now...?”

“They sound like an expression of love. The exact opposite of my mother’s wish that I’d never been born. Are they really completely contradictory, though? I mean, it’s so easy to interpret it from another angle.

“You had already served your purpose by the time you were born.”

My mother’s motto was my foundation. The foundation of all that I was.

A few words shouldn’t have been able to shatter it.

“—Oh.”

—But they did.

“Ngh...aaaaaaaaah.....”

I couldn’t keep it together.

A single sentence eradicated the premise that had kept me going.

It crumbled inside me all too easily, like a bunch of building blocks. The pieces thudded to the ground, never to be whole again.

Yes...I’m sure I had some sense in my daily life of how hollow it all was. I had noticed that my parents weren’t interested in me. Noticed the implications in those loving words.

“—Nh, nh.”

I hadn’t been abused or confined. I couldn’t come up with any real complaints when it came to my parents.

And yet, all the same, Aya and I were a pair of unnecessary objects in between Michishige and my mother.

If I had picked up on anything, it was that.

Right—

We weren't needed.

As I wept, Aya wrapped her arms around my head, as if she were taking pity on me.

“You are special.”

Her embrace was as gentle as ever.

“An innocent box without anything in it. An embodiment of potential. If there was a god capable of making the world's wishes come true, it would appear before you, not me. You have an extremely rare purity.”

But there was still more.

“However, that also means you are empty.”

“Wh-what should I do...?”

“You and I are both hollow, and that's why we have been searching for meaning ever since we were born. It fills the void within us. Let's give our births meaning, the greatest meaning we can find. Let's bring happiness to everyone in the world. Then everyone will need us,” she whispered softly, temptingly, into my ear. “We will have value, being here.”

Still.

“...We may...find another purpose...” I still couldn't muster the resolve to abandon myself. Aya's way of life wouldn't work for me.

“...Look, Maria. I can make anyone do what I want to a certain extent, even people I've just met. Right?”

“Yeah, but...”

“How many years has it been since we met, Maria? How many years have we spent under the same roof? Are you trying to say you're immune?”

“...Oh.”

“...That's right, Maria. I'm already manipulating you. I'm going to make you

seek happiness. A part of you may reject it, but you will make the decision in the end.”

Aya declared:

“Maria Otonashi will become Aya Otonashi.”

The instant she said that to me, I could see the transparent threads of the spider. The spiderweb I had seen over and over in my nightmares that wouldn’t let me free.

I was entangled in those threads, and there was no escape. I was going to be devoured, just like the others. The teacher in that diary, the boy in the cap, and everyone else who had ever been involved with my sister.

Aya smiled. “So let’s get started. We don’t hate anyone, but there is an indescribable urge driving us forward. We have an enemy—you might call it emptiness. Well, let’s show them.”

It was bewitching.

More than anything, her smile as she spoke was bewitching.

“Let’s show them the nature of our revenge.”



The funeral of my three family members took place in the rain.

I stood in my school uniform, cradling a portrait of my sister, not speaking to anyone.

When I looked at myself in the mirror, I saw the cast-off shell of a cicada. If someone applied just a little pressure, I would break with a crisp, satisfying *snap*.

“Maria, I’m going to set out on a journey when I’m fourteen.”

Why had Aya chosen joint suicide? If she died, then she wouldn’t be able to make everyone in the world happy.

This result was one of her predictions, though, so I was sure she had planned it far in advance.

In other words, my sister had intended to place her trust in me from the very

beginning. She had always wanted me to take up her mission of bringing joy to the people of the world. That was why she had me witness the arson and read the diary.

Then she had decided I was ready.

On her fourteenth birthday, Aya manipulated the enmity of her former teacher, driving him to cause an accident and kill her.

Revenge, she'd said.

Aya had said she would have her revenge.

I'm sure she hated our family. Hated the family that had made her empty. And she had hidden from me an earnest wish for vengeance, true vengeance. She had polished and polished this plan for murder.

I'm certain I was among the targets of her revenge. She wouldn't kill me, but my heart would be imprisoned.

The proof was that I no longer had anywhere to go.

"This cursed girl is the daughter of an affair. Who's going to take custody? Certainly not us," my relatives complained. "Give us the money; give us the house; give us the land." I wasn't part of the battle, but when the dust settled, my family's entire fortune, including the house and land, was taken away without anyone taking charge of me.

All I was given was my parents' insurance money, which was enough to support me until adulthood as long as I lived modestly. My relatives apparently decided that was enough responsibility for them.

Why would anyone think there was a place for me among people like that? I would rather waste away stuck in an abandoned cobweb.

Suddenly, everything in front of me had gone blank. It didn't feel as if I were trapped inside a cramped room so much as thrown into an infinite void without walls. No matter how far I walked in this colorless world, nothing changed, and I never arrived anywhere.

Except for one single thing.

A transparent, vestigial silhouette of Aya. With nowhere else to go, I happily

rushed over to it.

Aya.

It was still raining. Suddenly, I spotted a big spider covered in mud and picked it up calmly. Just as Aya had done back then, I closed my fingers around it.

I opened my fist.

The big spider remained in my palm. I was unable to clench my fist with any force. The spider scuttled off my palm and vanished, leaving my hand stained with mud.

I couldn't help but feel something at that moment.

—I was going to become Aya Otonashi.

My soul was gone. Sometime later, I suddenly found myself beneath a heavy downpour. My memories of how I arrived here had slipped away. I wasn't sure how much time had passed since the funeral.

I had no idea where I was. Water dripped from the bottom of my soaked uniform's skirt.

The storm washed away my emotions, sapped away my warmth, wore down my contours, thinned my blood, and melted me into the ground.

How long had I been walking in the rain? Maybe it hadn't been that much time. All the same, this trek with no destination had chipped away at my soul until it was withered and gaunt.

I persisted in my journey—

And when my soul had completely eroded—

—I was standing in the light.

That was the only way to describe it. There was no sky or land there, and I was naked as the day I was born. I felt myself diffusing into the radiance, my existence fading. That space would not allow me to *be* as an individual. All things had equal value—no value at all.

I could feel an almost imperceptible current in the air, though. My movements caused a stir, ever so slight. Not that it meant anything, as far as I

could tell. That was why I was going to disappear from this world.

Oh, but.

But I have something to do.

I have to bring happiness to everyone in the world.

That directive was the one thing left in my empty self. That instant, the currents in the air were set, blowing toward me.

The light.

The light.

The light spilled over.

The next thing I knew, I was out of the light. I sat up in an unfamiliar forest with the cries of owls and insects in my ears. I couldn't do anything after that, though. I was petrified, unable to move. There was nothing in my heart to spur me onward.

I was still for so long that the sky began changing color. Suddenly, I put my hand in my pocket and pulled out what was inside.

It was a small wrapped bag. I opened it, and inside was a little bottle of scented oil I had intended to give to Aya for her birthday.

I undid the lid and caught the faint scent of peppermint.

Enough emotion had returned to me to make my muddy school uniform feel gross.

Then I noticed a small “box” in my hand. A beautifully transparent cube made of something like thin glass. It seemed so terribly fragile.

I understood instinctively.

This would grant my wish. I had the ability to make any wish come true now.

And it goes without saying that I had only one.

I named that box “Happiness.”

But it was flawed—misbegotten.



—*Bang, bang!*

I awaken to the sound of someone banging on a wall.

“...Mmm.”

I wipe my eyelids. I suspect my dream was one I know well, but I’ve already forgotten it.

The scent of peppermint lingers in the room.

I am exhausted in body and mind, but that scent allows me to get up.

“Okay, let’s get moving.”

I will stand and begin my search for a Box again. I don’t know if I will even get ahold of one. Even if I’m forgetting the past, I have to bring joy to everyone in the world.

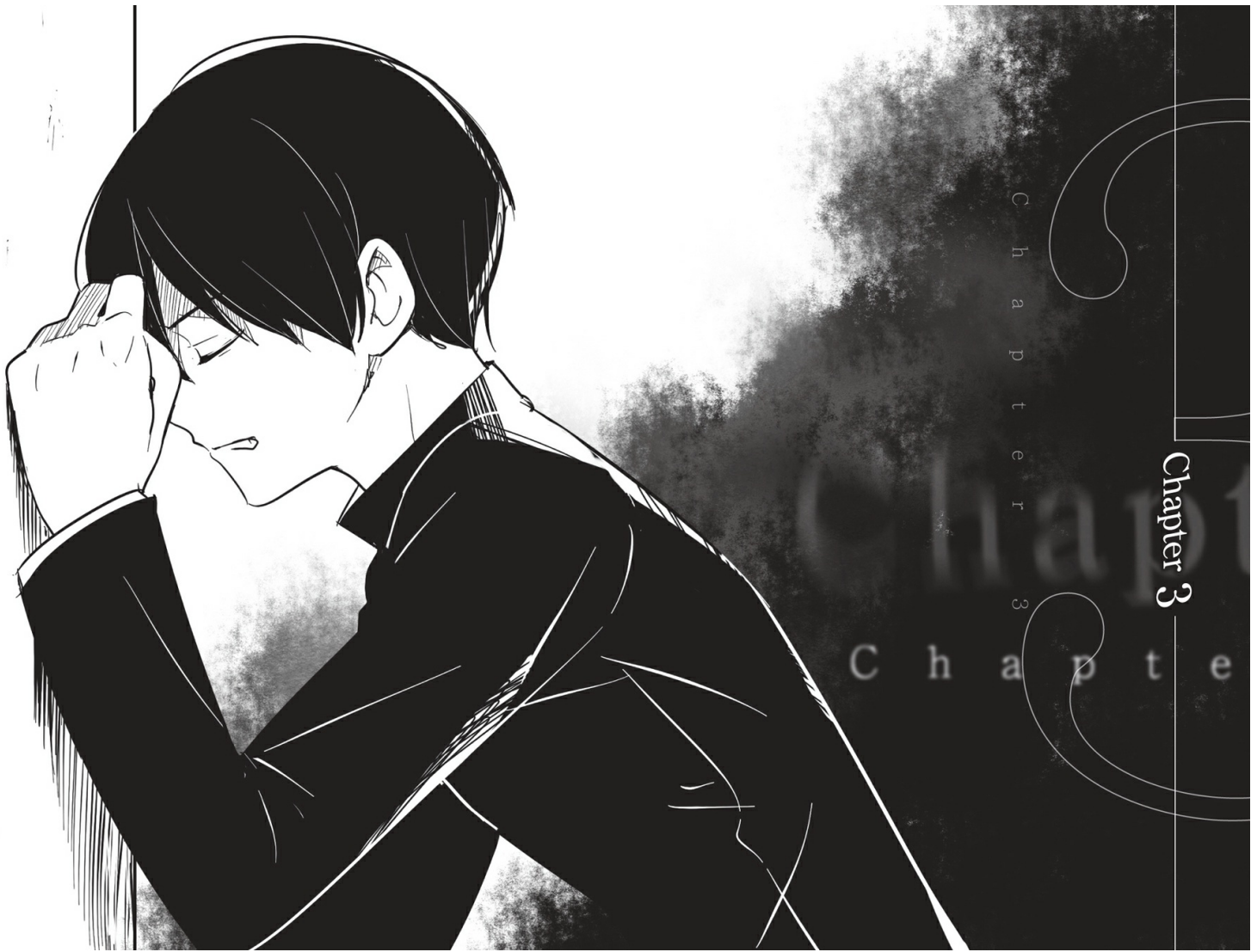
That is why I exist.

My legs tremble after I’ve stood and walked only a little ways. I have been walking for so, so long—it’s too much for such thin legs. I’ve also spent the equivalent of a lifetime in pointless repetition. But I can’t stop. There is no need to stop.

I live only for the sake of others. I won’t let anyone dissuade me from my purpose.

—*Bang, bang!*

Ugh...and that pounding on the wall is so annoying.



After the last time I saw Daiya Oomine at school, I received an e-mail from his address. Just one. There wasn't a single word about him written in it, let alone a greeting. All it contained was a home address in a distant prefecture that I had no connection to whatsoever.

Though I didn't know his true intentions, I could tell it meant something important.

I jumped aboard a bullet train without waiting for the next vacation to roll around.

The address is in an upscale residential neighborhood, and the house in question has a large square footage for the area.

But for whatever reason, the beautiful residence doesn't quite seem to fit in the neighborhood. Its spacious garden isn't maintained with much care, and there is a general aura of melancholy to the place.

And everything changes the instant I see the nameplate.

It says OTONASHI.

—*This is the house where Maria grew up. I know it.*

I hurriedly ring the doorbell. As soon as a weary-sounding middle-aged woman answers the door, I ask her about Maria without even saying hello. Her attitude changes drastically upon hearing the name Maria, and she ends the conversation right there.

No doubt about it. This woman knows the Maria I don't—the one who has never encountered a Box.

In that case, I can't let up. I'm capable of sacrificing friends for Maria's sake; there's no reason to let this stop me. I ring the doorbell over and over. Once I figure out they have no intention of responding, I climb over the gate and kill what I assume is a purebred dog they keep on the grounds of the manor. By the time the woman hears its final yelps and rushes out of the house, it's already dead. I show her its innards as a warning.

Now that she knows firsthand what a crazy bastard I am, the woman finally answers my questions out of sheer terror. She tells me about Maria and Aya

Otonashi.

The lady turns out to be Maria's aunt. I learn the story of the tragic accident that befell the Otonashi family, and how Maria was left all alone in the world. None of her relatives, including her aunt, know what Maria is doing now or even where she is.

Yeah, I knew it—that's how it is.

Maria has only me.

—That's why I will find her and save her.

But that vow is a memory from the distant, distant past.

It has nothing to do with the boy holding hands with Mogi now in this endlessly fake world.

I know none of it is real, but I simply live in this happy world.

Yeah—

If only that were true. Then I could have been saved.

30,333rd Time

"I love you, Kazu."

"I love you, too, Mogi."

"Let's stay together forever."

"We will."

32,875th Time

"I love you, Kazu."

"I love you, too, Mogi."

"Let's stay together forever."

“We will.”

35,890th Time

“I love you, Kazu.”

“I love you, too, Mogi.”

“Let’s stay together forever.”

“We will.”

37,227th Time

“I love you, Kazu.”

“I love you, too, Mogi.”

“Let’s stay together forever.”

“We will.”

“...Huh?”

What gives?

This is the moment when we confess our love to each other, the most joyful moment of my life—but it doesn’t make me very happy.

40,301st Time

“I love you, Kazu.”

I love Mogi, too. But I’ve realized something.

“...Wait until tomorrow.”

This world is a time loop. I have to bring “her” back into my normal life, even though I’ve forgotten her name. That is my goal, set in stone.

It's why I can't return Mogi's feelings, no matter how much I care for her.

I run from the schoolyard and make my way to the roof. If I jump from there, I can keep my memories in place.

It's probably a miracle that I noticed this world is just the same day on a loop. If so, then I can't let this opportunity go to waste. It's possible I've gone through this day tens of thousands of times already without realizing it.

It's not that jumping to my own death doesn't frighten me. It's insane. But fear is not enough to break my resolve.

I jump beneath a sky dyed red by the sunset.

Splat.

As I hear the sound of my own skull and its contents scattering across the ground, my consciousness—

40,302nd Time

—stays.

I throw up all over the classroom floor, overwhelmed by the shock of the fall just a moment ago.

With a backward glance at my confused classmates, I dash out of the room. I have to find a lead about the other girl. I've forgotten her name, but for some reason, I still remember where we went together.

I run around, searching for traces of her. But I find nothing.

Even if it was fruitless this time around, I must not lose these memories. If I ever stop questioning this world, I may end up repeating the same day tens of thousands of times—tens of billions.

I jump again under the red sky. My head splatters.

40,303rd Time

I've gone all over the school, but I don't find anything that helps.
I jump, and my head splatters.

43,058th Time

“

”

49,178th Time

My emotions return for the first time in quite a while, and I remember how to speak.

I start sobbing. I can't do this anymore. I can't keep killing myself over and over.

“...Let's go back...and have fun at the school festival.”

I leave the rooftop and head for the bonfire in the schoolyard. Mogi starts talking to me.

I can never again ignore Mogi's confession.

“I love you, Kasumi Mogi.”

Thus, my long, long struggle comes to an end.

55,555th Time

“I love you, Kazu.”

“I love you, too, Mogi.”

“Let's stay together forever.”

“We will.”

59,876th Time

“Wait until tomorrow.”

This world is a time loop, I’ve realized. I have to bring “her” back into my normal life, even though I’ve forgotten her name. That is my goal, set in stone.

To hold on to my memories, I jump beneath a sky dyed red by the sunset.

65,222nd Time

“...I’ll go back. Go back into that fun school festival.”

I can never again ignore Mogi’s confession.

“I love you, Kasumi Mogi.”

Thus, my long, long struggle comes to an end.

66,666th Time

“I love you, Kazu.”

“I love you, too, Mogi.”

“Let’s stay together forever.”

“We will.”

70,512th Time

“Wait until tomorrow.”

To hold on to my memories, I jump beneath a sky dyed red by the sunset.

78,165th Time

“I love you, Kasumi Mogi.”

Thus, my long, long struggle comes to an end.

88,888th Time

“I love you, Kazu.”

“I love you, too, Mogi.”

“Let’s stay together forever.”

“We will.”

102,538th Time

“I love you, Kazu.”

“I love you, too, Mogi.”

“Let’s stay together forever.”

“We will.”

I love her, and she loves me back. Is there anything in the world more wonderful than that?

I’m the happiest man on the planet. I want to stay this happy forever.

So what gives?

Something feels incredibly wrong. Hey, was this world always this colorless? Was it always this cramped and oppressive?

I’m so happy, and yet I’m struggling to breathe—as if I’m at the bottom of the

sea.

124,390th Time

Let's say, just hypothetically, that this world is continually repeating the day of the school festival, and no one is aware of the repetition, like in the Rejecting Classroom.

Maybe I, at least, am able to notice the loops. If so, then you'd expect me to try to get out of this place. I'd try to escape for the sake of the girl whose name I can't remember. I'd consider any means, even suicide.

But let's say that I don't have any clues, that this world doesn't have a single lead. I doubt I would give up that easily, but eventually, I'd have to because there simply isn't anything to go on. When I'm exhausted, when I've lost my reason and my humanity, I will relinquish my memories and try to find meaning in this looping world in order to keep my mind intact.

And I will choose to live with Mogi.

But that won't make it end.

After all, if this world keeps on repeating and repeating, I'll eventually realize it's repeating again. I will struggle to find a way out, fail, and give up again. I will choose Mogi again to end my suffering, failing to recall what I've done before.

That will repeat. Over and over again.

It would be a hell of uninterrupted torment. Countless times, I would jump into the lake of blood and suffering in the belief that some nonexistent hope was to be found at the bottom, and then I would forget again. Then I would foolishly dive again in search of hope. There is no escaping it.

No conclusion. No happy ending, of course, but not a bad ending, either.

Let's say this is where I am.

"I love you, Kazu," Mogi says, illuminated by the flames of the bonfire. I love Mogi, too, and yet the words that should bring me joy don't affect me at all.

“Kazu?”

I run off with my head down as Mogi cries for me to stop. I ignore her, leave the schoolyard, and enter the building.

I'll go to the roof. That's what comes to mind unconsciously, but I shake my head at the thought. Why does that come so easily? It's as if the jump has become habitual.

Obeying habit is not going to get me out of here.

I turn back, this time entering the home economics classroom.

Breathing raggedly, I lean against a cooking table. I can see the bonfire from here through the window. As I watch the dancing students, I think to myself: *The resolution is too low.*

It's so pixelated, almost like a mosaic. It's obvious it's a sham. I'm sure the world was this way from the very beginning—I simply never spotted it before. If I don't believe this, there's no saving me.

That truly is just an example I thought up. It's not real. Something that horrifying could never be.

It's all a wild delusion, and I'm mentally ill.

But there's a reality I cannot flee.

I want to die already.

I open a drawer and pull out a kitchen knife. I'm oddly unhesitant.

I plunge the knife into my heart. I can feel the undeniable sensation of muscle squelching, as if I've stabbed a giant caterpillar. I'm gushing blood.

I should have died.

124,391st Time

But my memory carries over. I teleport, slip through time, and arrive in the classroom just before the school festival begins.

I'm able to accept this out of hand. It lets me know that my suspicion that the school festival is repeating is based in reality.

There's only one thought on my mind. I go straight to the home economics room.

I find a knife, then stab it into my own heart.

124,392nd Time

And yet, I retain my memories. I want to die, and yet the more I try, the more I prove to myself that I am in the midst of a purposeless cycle.

A knife to the heart isn't enough to kill me, it seems. Is it because it takes time for me to bleed out? Would an instant death be any different?

Stumbling out of the classroom, I head to the bypass and find the biggest truck I can. I jump out in front of it unhesitatingly and let it hit me.

124,393rd Time

However, my memory carries over, and I am alive. I'm in the classroom.
"Aaaa

I'm shrieking involuntarily, and my classmates stare at me in bewilderment. I don't care.

I go to the train station and head to the very end of the platform.

I jump in front of the train as it barrels toward us. My body flies apart.

124,394th Time

And yet, my memory carries over, and I return to the classroom. I'm fine, even though that was as close to an instant death as possible. I'm still alive.

There is no means of escaping this looping world.

I start wailing. I lie on my back and thrash my arms and legs like some child throwing a fit because his parents won't buy him a toy. My classmates give me strange looks, but I don't care.

They're going to forget about it anyway, right?

Just because I make myself feel a bit better with a good cry doesn't mean I'm ready to give up on dying. I get up and run into the bathroom. I sit on the toilet and look up ways to die on my cell phone. I'll try all of the causes of death written here. There may be one that is the right answer. My heart rate finally returns to normal with this thought. I find peace only when I'm thinking about death.

I'll start things this time with electrocution.

I climb a utility pole and grab the three power lines with wet hands.

124,395th Time

I don't die. But I'm not surprised. Not dying doesn't make me pessimistic.

I'll try hanging myself this time.

124,396th Time

This time I'll drown in the ocean.

124,423rd Time

Death by train, death by impact, death by electrocution, death by hanging, death by falling, death by crushing, drowning, bleeding out, suffocation, freezing, burning, bombing—I experienced pretty much every death out there, and I still didn't die.

I finally give up on dying... Give up? Ha-ha, hey, I guess I'm giving up again.

A dry laugh escapes my lips. I give up. How many times does this make it? How many tens of thousands of times? How many times have I lived and relived this, chasing a dream that will never come true?

Suddenly angry, I scratch furiously at my head until it bleeds. Not that that solves anything, of course.

My back is completely against a wall. There's nothing I can do. If I stop taking my life and lose my memories of the repetitions, I'll simply try to find traces of the girl whose name I have forgotten again. Then I'll throw in the towel when I can't find any leads and choose to live here with Mogi. I'll quickly forget my long struggle, only to fall to despair and start killing myself repeatedly when I suddenly realize I'm living the same day over and over yet again.

Give me a break. What sort of hell is this? If there's a crueler form of torment out there, I'd love to know what it is.

The meager hope I've held on to in this hellish place and the despair that arrives all too quickly are both equally meaningless. They've been painted over until they're one and the same. I've been forced to ceaselessly walk through this sandstorm with no destination. It continues no matter how far I walk. The landscape has been eroded away. My throat is so dry, and when I open my mouth, the sand comes in. I cough violently.

What did I do? Why is this my fate?!

"Someone... Someone answer me!"

I shout, but no one responds. I dash out of the classroom. My legs lead me to that familiar place—the roof. The red sky leaps into my vision when I open the door.

I'm briefly stunned, and then I laugh at myself.

"Heh...heh..."

I mean, the sky is dyed red even though it's still morning. It isn't the color of twilight, either. This sinister red is the rich hue of blood.

Looks as if I lost my mind quite some time ago, and that's why my perception

of the world is skewed. I look at the blue sky and see a red one.

I can't stop laughing as I approach the chain-link fence. *I don't care what happens anymore. So what if I die?* Looking down at the ground, I see a whole pile of dead bodies.

I don't understand. It's absurd. It must be a hallucination. Red-black blood is pooled beneath the corpses. While there are a variety of expressions on the bodies, the majority of their faces are contorted with pain.

And all of them belong to me.

“—Ha-ha.”

Hey, these are all the lives I've spit out. All the lives I've ended here for no reason.

I had been laughing, but now I have to cry. I suppose it's only natural. This sight is a visual assault. It's as if someone is stabbing my eyeballs with a knife.

I have to face reality. This is the fate that's befallen me here. I've died so many times. And yet, I'm still not free. It's earned me nothing. There's nowhere to run.

“AAA/

I scream.

I scream even though my voice will never reach anywhere.

“It's nothing to get so twisted up about. You should be proud.”

No one should have heard my cry, but a voice replies. I'm not even fazed by this impossibility. Having auditory hallucinations after visual ones isn't enough to shock me.

“It's proof of how you've resisted this world.”

The one who spoke is sitting irreverently atop the piled corpses, legs crossed. I open my eyes to look at them and see a sympathetic smile.

The person's face—belongs to me, Kazuki Hoshino.

I don't care that the hallucination resembles me. What matters more is its infuriatingly tranquil demeanor.

It's just so similar to my enemy's.

That's why I shout back, full of emotion, "So what if I've resisted? All this dying and holding on to my memory doesn't mean anything! It never will!"

"It isn't without meaning."

The thing with my face responds.

"What?"

"Pay attention, and you will know it isn't meaningless."

"Pay attention to what?!"

"The changes you have made."

Changes? The only change is that I've lost my mind. And maybe I've fallen in love with Mogi. That's it. What does any of that matter? It doesn't make anything different.

"You're wrong," "I" say. "Why, look how red the sky is."

"....."

It definitely is red.

What about it, though?

I look at "me" again, trying to determine his true intent. He is the only thing in full color, sitting on top of the monochrome sketch of a haphazard mound of corpses. He's smiling creepily. There is a scar on his right hand.

A scar. What did that mean again...?

What was the vow it represented...?

"Do you know why your fight in this world has been such a hard one? It's because you feel the pull of this place where everyone can live in bliss. You are unable to completely cast aside a world where you and Kasumi Mogi are in love. Without those feelings, there would have been no need for this many bodies."

No need?

"You're saying all these bodies have a point?"

"Yes. After all, such things aren't necessary in a truly happy world, right? It

only gets in the way, doesn't it? On this stage, there is nothing but joy—except for this enormous pile. Did you really think it wouldn't have at least some sort of effect?"

"It's meaningless! It's just meaningless, and I can prove it! I can't even remember her—"

"Do not act as if you have forgotten."

"My" gentle voice suddenly becomes stern.

"Do not act as if you have forgotten 'her' name." "My" glare is cold. "Don't run away. Don't take refuge in false happiness. Look everything square in the face. Look at this world for what it is. You lack resolve. You lack the determination to abandon it all and serve only her. You unconsciously realized what sort of outcome putting that into action would invite. You could not do it because you knew that an even greater despair was waiting for you after you did."

"Wh-what're you—?"

"You know full well. You say you would do anything for her, yet you were unable to cross that final line. You couldn't cast aside your humanity. You lost the wound on your right hand, and you used that as an excuse to put off making that ultimate decision."

"I" gaze intently at me.

"Can you not save her without relying on the Empty Box? Are you that weak?"

I gulp and shake my head vigorously. "...It's just... I don't know what to do..."

"Call out her name. You will know for yourself once you do."

"B-but I forgot her name. I don't even remember what she was like..."

"You could never forget. There is no way you of all people could forget her. After all, you are her savior."

"My" expression softens. "Now finish this world off."

With that, "I" vanish.

The pile of corpses also disappears.

“_____”

I have been conversing with a visual and auditory hallucination, a delusion. But everything in this world is a delusion, with no reality to oppose it. Nothing is certain; there is no deeper structure, no core; it's an unreliable world, thin like the paper of a shoji screen. You could punch a hole in it with a little kick.

Even a delusion could slowly take over this place.

As my other self said, I look at my present situation head-on.

“...Oh, I see.”

I thought the red sky was my senses playing tricks on me.

That's wrong. When I really, really think back on it, I realize I was wrong.

The sky has always been red for the entire day here.

That's a proven fact.

My attack on this world has landed.

I've killed myself over and over to retain my memory. This place is meant to loop happily, and that was my act of rebellion. Much like scraping away at the wall of a prison cell with a spoon, I've been damaging this world bit by bit. There were times when the siren call of its normal life of lies tempted me. But even when my heart was briefly swayed, I never stopped resisting this world. I never truly lost my way.

Exulting in the red sky, I spread my hands and turn around in place.

—*Yes, this bloodstained sky is my handiwork.*

That's right. I'll do what my other self said to do.

“...I'll finish off this world.”

The untold repetitions were not all for nothing. Seeing the effect of my attacks has given me determination.

Ahhh...the excitement is burning behind my eyes.

I leave the rooftop and run down the stairs. I start to head straight back to the classroom right away, but I stop by the home economics room to pick a certain

something up first. The resolution lowers, and I pass by the blurry people. Damn, how did I never question how flimsy they are?

There is a girl in a wheelchair in the classroom—Kasumi Mogi. I can't see anyone else clearly, but she stands out in bold color.

"Mogi!" I shout, flushed and wide-eyed. She flinches. Anyone can see that there's something wrong with me.

I couldn't care less what they think.

I take both of Mogi's hands and ask her a question. "What do you think love is?"

Mogi just tilts her head with a puzzled look; I'm acting strange. Still gripping her hands firmly, I stare her in the eyes.

"O-ow... H-hey, what's gotten into you, Kazuki?"

"Hurry up and answer me."

Frightened, Mogi replies, "...Um, you asked about love, right? Well...I guess liking someone a whole lot? And caring for each other...maybe?"

I shake my head. "That's not enough. I think love goes much deeper than that. It's a *point of no return*. It's more than caring for your partner; it's absorbing each other, becoming inseparable. She and I are a single concept. A single body. Lose my partner, and I will no longer be myself. That's what I think love is!!"

It's turning into a rant.

"Yes. That's why the trace of her I've been searching for is right here."

I point at my chest.

"I couldn't find a single piece of her anywhere in this world. I thought there weren't any. Heh-heh...I'm such an idiot. It couldn't have been any closer. If I dissect myself, I'll find that part of her there."

"What... What are you talking about? You're scaring me..."

"Just understanding that isn't good enough. That alone won't bring me to her. I have to make myself feel her even more. What do you think I should do? Hey, what do you think I should do?"

“...S-stop!” Mogi knocks my hands away.

Am I shocked? Yeah, I am. I love Mogi, after all. But there’s no way around this.

I’m a traitor to this world. No one will take my side.

“I have to feel that trace of her inside me, more and more and more—”

I pull out the kitchen knife I had hidden in my pocket.

“—so *I need to be alone.*”

“...Huh, ah...!”

I thrust the knife toward Mogi’s chest.

There’s a way to erase people from this world.

Back in the Rejecting Classroom, Mogi succeeded at erasing others by killing them.

I’m trying the same method to get rid of Mogi.

I yank the knife out of her torso, and blood comes gushing out. Guilt washes over me along with the spray. I love Mogi, truly love her, and yet here I am killing her. Murdering a girl who has no idea what is happening, who tries to live positively despite her awful injury. If I recall those fun times I had with her in even the slightest, my brain will likely cease to function, crushed by the guilt of what I have done.

But I am insane. I am capable of kicking morality to the curb and locking away those memories.

I chant softly amid the uproar in the classroom.

“Love.

“Love.

“Love.”

Keep your thoughts together. Don’t hesitate. Remain resolute. Abandon your emotions. Cast aside the future. Don’t stray from the course. Keep moving forward. For the sake of love. For the sake of love. For the sake of love.

For the sake of love, everyone must die.

Now scream.

Scream the name of the girl who lies at the end of your path.

“Maria!”

Yes, her name is—

—Maria.

Maria Otonashi.

I chose her. I chose Maria.

That’s why—

“Please just disappear, Kasumi Mogi!”

—I jab the kitchen knife back into Mogi’s chest.

...Hey, now that I think about it, Mogi once tried to kill me with a home economics knife back in the Rejecting Classroom. She couldn’t bring herself to stab me in the end, though. She was unable cross that final line and kill someone she loved. She kept her humanity intact.

I have stepped over that line.

This is farewell to Kazuki Hoshino as a human.

An impact runs through my right shoulder. I drop the knife and fall shoulder first. Upon looking up to see what happened, I find Haruaki standing there, his eyes wide. It seems he slammed into me and knocked me over.

“What... What...are you doing, Hosshi?!”

Haruaki attempts to tend to Mogi, but it’s no use. As the one who stabbed her, I know.

I killed Kasumi Mogi for certain.

That alone won’t end this, however. Mogi *is* the most powerful person binding me to this world, but there are others with more than enough strength to keep me here. Haruaki is particularly dangerous.

—*Should I stab him, too?*

I consider it, but it would be difficult to take out someone with a physique like Haruaki's when he's already on guard.

If I stay here, Haruaki and the others will probably work me over for my crimes. Haruaki's words might cause my resolution to falter. I can't rule out the possibility that some twist of fate might prevent a massacre.

I have to get out of here, and fast.

I should get away before my human heart returns.

I jam the knife into my throat.

All around me, they're screaming. I fall facedown and smile as I trace the blood flowing from me with my fingers.

—Yes, let your mind go.

Lose your mind until you can no longer accept anyone but yourself.

Get rid of everything else so that you can be completely alone for your reunion with the Maria within your heart.

124,424th Time

—Maria.

The moment I shout that name, the gears of my mind spin so fast I can practically hear them. My brain scrapes and shudders with a shock that threatens to crush me. I wish it would show a little more concern for its host.

The images that fill it, though, are memories of genuine happiness, playing across my mind in a pale-blue light.

Trivial recollections from some other time.

I guess it was around the rainy season. I was in Maria's room, which smelled of peppermint.

I was preparing frozen udon in the kitchen, although I didn't really know how. My face was clouded with concern.

“Kazuki.”

Her voice sounded thin, unlike her usual dignified tone. Ah...I remember now. Maria was the only one who called me by my first name alone. It was unique to her.

I poked my head from the kitchen into the other room, large cooking chopsticks still in my hand. Maria was buried beneath the blankets in her semidouble bed, so deep that only her flushed face was peeking out. There was a cooling sheet stuck to her forehead. Maybe it's a little tactless to think this about someone with a fever, but she was a little cuter than usual.

“What’s wrong, Maria?”

She coughed and smiled at me contentedly. “...Heh-heh. Nothing...”

“Huh?”

Even though she had hacked up a lung trying to call for me?

“It was nothing. I just wanted to see your face... *Cough, cough!*”

She didn’t tell me she needed anything else. It apparently really was nothing.

I returned to the kitchen, puzzled. Once I’d finished up the udon, I went back to the room and set the bowls on the table.

Maria got up, but her head seemed especially heavy. She sat on the cushion, which was a good sign, but instead of picking up her chopsticks, she just glared at the food.

“...What’s the matter?”

“I was thinking it looks hot, but it’s hard for me to blow on it.”

“Oh, I see. Take your time... Hey? Why do you look so upset?”

“You’re so dense. Wouldn’t a dependable man offer to—*cough, cough!*—cool it for me?”

“Um...”

For someone who sounded so weak, she was pretty demanding. So I guess she wanted me to blow on the udon a couple of times and feed it to her with her mouth open?

“...Hey.”

Wasn't that embarrassing? Wasn't that the kind of thing those sickeningly sweet couples do...?

“Do it.”

“...Uh, well...it's kinda embarrass—”

“I said do it.”

I got the feeling she would keep glaring at me until I gave in, which I finally did.

I picked up some noodles and blew on them, then held them out to Maria's mouth, but for some reason, she wouldn't open it.

“...Uh, what's the problem?”

Maria just grinned at me instead of answering.

“...Don't tell me you're waiting for me to say 'Ahhh'?”

“If you already know what to do, then do it.”

“...A-ahhh.”

“Louder.”

Now I was starting to panic. “Ahhhh!!”

I held out the chopsticks, blushing even redder than Maria's feverish face.

Maria at last opened her mouth. Her red tongue was defenseless.

The sight made me a little flustered; I hope you'll forgive me.

“Mmm.” She slurped up the udon. “Could use some more seasoning,” she told me, looking extremely content.

You selfish—!

“Also, this is too much trouble, so I'll eat the rest myself.”

So what was all that she was saying before?!

And Maria wasn't finished being cruel. After she finished eating her udon, she took off her pajamas—shucked them off without any warning.

Of course, that meant she was in her underwear.

“Wh-what’re you doing?!” I yelled, hurriedly averting my eyes.

“I haven’t changed clothes, so my pajamas are sticky with sweat. It’s even worse now that I’ve eaten something hot. I feel gross.”

“That’s no reason to just take off your clothes! Did the fever turn you into an exhibitionist?”

“I want to take a shower, but that isn’t good when you have a cold. Plus, I might pass out in the middle of bathing. So, Kazuki, could you wipe me down with a wet towel?”

“...Wh-what’re you saying?! Take a look at yourself! You’re in your underwear! Have a little modesty! You’re a girl who’s younger than me!”

“I don’t care. Do it.”

Not only was she selfish, but now she was trying to molest me!

“Wh-what’re you going to do if I get turned on and make a move on you?”

“I’m half-conscious as it is, so it wouldn’t matter. I’d forget all about it soon anyway. It wouldn’t count.”

Now those were the words of someone who was trying to sexually harass me!

“.....Oh man.”

I let out a deep sigh and gave up trying to dissuade her. As stubborn as she was, Maria would never turn back after taking things this far. And I think she really did feel sweaty and gross. Probably. I filled the wash bowl with warm water and wrung out a towel. I pressed the damp cloth to her delicate body.

I was holding my breath.

There wasn’t anything I could do about that. I tried not to look, but I could still see her white bra.

Ungh...what if something happens?

“Are you about to lose it?”

“N-no!”

Even if I did, though, I probably wouldn't do anything to Maria. I wouldn't want to hurt her just because lust got the better of me. She was teasing me like this because she knew that.

Dammit... She has me in the palm of her hand... Ugh.

I simply had to keep convincing myself to get through it. *This is a mannequin, a mannequin, a mannequin.*

Once I'd finished wiping down her back with my sanity intact, it was time for her arms. I wrung out the towel and wiped them both.

Maria's body didn't have any fat and lacked that feminine softness. Her ribs were very prominent, and it was plain to see she was still growing.

"Ugh..."

And once I noticed, I could no longer convince myself she was a mannequin. My hand froze.

"What's wrong? Get on with it."

The corners of Maria's mouth perked upward. She was definitely enjoying this.

To be clear, I do want to touch her—I want to touch her more! I'm loving this, too! So no one's winning here!

Before I could break, I tried to trick myself into thinking this so I could finish wiping her down. The storm in my heart had exhausted me thoroughly, and I ended up lying on the floor wheezing unevenly.

And yet, Maria's cruelty was not over.

"I'm cold. Kazuki, I'm cold."

"Huh?"

She was shivering theatrically, and then she said something even more terrifying. "Share your warmth with me."

That's how I ended up sleeping under the blankets with Maria in her T-shirt and underwear.

Her long hair was pressed against my nose, and I could feel her back and legs

against me.

This is okay, right? I can go for it now, right? If she were a regular girl, I would actually take this as a sign! ...Okay, fine, I get it! I'm not the type of guy to make a move anyway!

I couldn't see with her back to me, but I could imagine puppet master Maria's smug expression right then.

For whatever reason, though, she didn't say anything to get under my skin. Maria was silent, merely catching her breath. She didn't do anything aside from quietly squeeze my hand.

Maybe she's asleep? I thought, and that was when she finally said something in a small voice.

"This takes me back..."

Her head moved slightly.

"Lying next to you like this reminds me of the smell of disinfectant in the school infirmary. I used to get sick easily, and it was hard for me to adjust to being around the people at school, so I spent a lot of time with the nurses. That was when my older sister—" Maria stopped.

"...Maria?"

She never talked about the past. As far as I knew, she had lost pretty much all her memories due to the Misbegotten Happiness.

"...I must be about to pass out; I'm making up stories about my past... Forget what I said."

I didn't pursue the issue any further. I was sure that if I did, she would never tell me the rest.

"Kazuki, I'm sorry," she said, still turned away. "I might have gotten you sick, too. Sorry."

So she finally says it now... No, she probably was worried about it the entire time, but she just couldn't bring herself to say it. That's how she is.

"It's fine. I don't care if I do get sick. You've got a fever; I could tell you

needed help. If anyone is going to nurse you back to health, it might as well be me.”

“You really mean that, and that’s the problem,” Maria said. “You’re too kind. It really is a problem.”

“...I’m sure it doesn’t bother you.”

“It does. It bothers me to...depend on someone this much. I have to be on my own...but with you, I always...” She trailed off.

“Maria?”

I heard her snoring softly. I thought maybe she was pretending since things had gotten awkward, but it seemed that this time she had truly drifted off.

Normally, she would never have displayed such genuine weakness. Maybe the fever really had made her woozy.

“...I’ll stay with you forever, even if you try to tell me it’s a problem. I’ll always be with you, even if I catch your colds or worse. I would do anything to be with you. I would give anything and everything.”

I embraced her fragile body and said, “Let’s stay together, always and forever.”

It wasn’t a vow, exactly. It was nothing that dramatic; I was just saying what was on my mind.

I wasn’t misunderstanding or exaggerating my own importance; we were already tied to each other on a fundamental level, drawing upon the same nourishment to live. I truly believed that.

It was only Maria who was under the impression that there was still time.

“Even if you were to disappear into a world beyond my reach...”

I stroked her hair.

“...I know I would find you.”

That was really only one page from our normal day-to-day. There was nothing special about it.

But my resolve was there even in the insignificant moments, all throughout

our daily life together.

The resolve that would eventually create that mountain of corpses.

I've been saying it all along. I am Maria's knight. I've said all along that I will destroy and slay all obstacles that keep me from her. I will climb the mound of rubble and remains it creates to reach her.

All I have to do is see it through.



I return from my reminiscence to this charade, this prison of a world.

I'm standing in a hallway.

"Let's stay together, always and forever," I say to myself, lowering my gaze.

Haruaki's dead body is there.

The fact hits me like an invisible bat to the head.

My hand holding the knife is unpleasantly wet. Blood drips from between my fingers. Each drop is louder than it should be, as if someone has added an echo effect.

Oh, that's right; I had fled from reality. I was thinking back on my time with Maria because I couldn't accept that I had murdered Haruaki.

I should make use of my memories with Maria from here on out, too. I will use them to bind my mind in place. If I don't, I will never be able to endure what I'm going to do.

I will accept this fight. I will stain the decorations of this fun school festival with blood and gore. I will spread murder and violence among the smiles and turn them all to despair. I will ruin it all.

"What're you doing, Kazu?" Daiya comes running up. "What is this...? What have you done to Haru...?"

He is scowling, his fists clenched. The situation is plain as day, but I can tell Daiya doesn't exist.

"...Daiya."

Back in the real world, I would never see Daiya again. He had committed a grievous error that could never be undone.

In here, though, this Daiya has never even heard of a Box, and we get along well. He has been able to resume his romantic relationship with Kokone.

Here in this wonderful world, we could be friends forever.

Meaning...

“I’m going to kill you, too.”

...Daiya is a barrier trying to keep me in this realm.

“...What the...hell are you...?”

“I’m going to ask you something, Daiya.”

And I do.

“Do you know a Kasumi Mogi?”

“What the hell does that mean?! Who the hell is ‘Kasumi Mogi’?!”

Yep, Mogi is gone from this world. She doesn’t exist in anyone’s memories, either. Murdering her last time successfully erased her from this place.

I’m sure Haruaki won’t be in the next world, either.

If everyone important to me vanishes, then I’ll lose all reason to cling to this world.

I’m going to kill Daiya with a kitchen knife. I have a chance now while he’s confused. And if I fail, I can kill myself and try again in the next loop.

But—

“—Ah.”

—there’s a *clang* as the knife falls. My hand slipped open.

“Unh, aaaaaaaaah...”

I can’t stop the flood of tears welling up. I’m sobbing profusely.

Oh, that’s right. This is painful. It hurts too much. I may have taken my own life with no remorse here in this world, but taking the lives of others is a whole

new dimension of torture. I've forgotten all about what the real world was like, so for me, this is murder, pure and simple. I can't fool myself into thinking I don't care just because this world repeats itself. The people I kill actually disappear. I can't take back their deaths. I hate it. It hurts. I don't want to do it. It feels as if I'm killing myself the long way around. My heart is fading. My heart will be lost. My self is disappearing.

"Unh, gh—"

But that's okay. In fact, that makes it okay. After all, if I fade, the Maria inside of me will become visible. I may no longer be me by the time that happens, but I will be able to meet her. I'll most likely be broken—or am I already broken? Is it too late no matter what I do?

Whatever.

I'll chant a spell and force myself to act.

Love. Love. Love. Love. *Love.*

The commotion has grown even larger as I stand there in a stupor with Daiya. The terrified students are still keeping their distance from me, but I'm sure they'll try to restrain me soon enough.

Now that I've just barely come back to my senses, I push my way through the crowd and head for the stairs. The students are still hesitant, so they don't come after me right away. I dash up to the roof with the sound of footsteps behind me. I guess they've decided not to let me go.

I quickly dive from the rooftop to my death.

124,425th Time

I ask Kokone to come to the roof, and then I kill her and run from the school before the uproar starts.

I start thinking to myself.

I can get only so far killing people one at a time with a knife. I need tools that can take people out more efficiently. If I got a machine gun and did what they

do in America, that would be effective. Or, since I'm not worried about dying myself, how about turning myself into a bomb like a terrorist? ...Nah, that's not realistic. It won't be that easy to get ahold of machine guns or dynamite. I couldn't care less about the law now, or about taking lives to get them, but it's still too difficult. Maybe I could find a way if I had more than a day to work with, but getting those things just isn't feasible in a world that resets after one day. Should I break into a US military base and steal some weapons? ...That isn't a possibility even though I don't have to get out alive. In that case, what about poisoning?

I could track down some aconite and extract the toxins. Get ahold of a bit of cyanide. Could that work? It doesn't sound too far-fetched.

...Oh man. Mass murder is tougher than I thought.

For starters, I get some gasoline from a filling station, then take it back to school and splash it around. A teacher notices me sooner than I expected, probably because of the smell, so when I set the building on fire with a lighter, it's not as effective.

Even though I was right in front of the explosion, I was unharmed, so I end my life with a knife in my neck instead.

124,426th Time

Apparently, not a single person died in the gasoline-fueled blaze. The school festival looks the same as ever. I make every effort to try the poison strategy, but I can't get my hands on any substances in time.

So I decide to hold off on poison for the present. Instead, I bash in the skull of the driver of a large truck parked in the lot of a convenience store and steal his rig. The plan was to plow into the school and run over some students, but I don't have a license, so I screw up and get into an accident at an intersection before I can even get there.

I don't die in the accident, but my right arm is absolutely pulverized. Can't kill anyone like this. So I kill myself with a stab to the throat again.

124,427th Time

I manage to get my hands on some poison and put it in the plastic bottles of oolong tea during the after-party following the bonfire. After watching my classmates collapse with cries of agony, I go to the rooftop and jump.

124,428th Time

I'm surprised to find that most of my classmates are alive despite the extremely fatal dose of poison I administered. Only three of them are gone. Spending the entire day finding poison is a waste of effort.

I'll give it another go this time, and if it doesn't work well, I should probably switch to another method.

124,429th Time

A sudden fit of reason hits, my psyche collapses, and I destroy myself.

124,435th Time

After a string of suicides, my mind finally recovers enough to kill people again. I won't be using poison anymore. It's more efficient to do things the hard way by summoning people one by one and killing them with sharp objects.

124,444th Time

I finish off all my classmates, but the world doesn't end. My classroom just becomes an unused room, and the festival goes on.

This world is different from the Rejecting Classroom, which involved only a single class. It's not going to be undone simply because I got rid of my classmates.

What can I do to put a stop to it, then? Kill off the entire human race? After I had this much trouble with just the people in my class?

Filled with despair at the thought of this impossible task, I lose my mind again and put myself out of my misery.

124,445th Time

I'm back on my feet after one self-destruct. Well, my mind is definitely a mess, but at least I can think.

What keeps me going is that the cracks in the red sky are visibly spreading, ever so slightly. My actions are undeniably undoing this "happy world."

The next milestone is to eliminate every person in the school.

I decide to try stealing a truck again. This time, I don't botch the driving and successfully ram the truck into the students enjoying the bonfire. I die when I plow into the school at sixty miles per hour.

124,446th Time

However, even that gets me only three casualties. It never occurred to me that killing people efficiently would be so difficult. Really drives home how amazing military weapons are. They're designed for the job.

I decide to gather everyone from school in one place so I can off them with minimal effort. They follow along when I kill one and take another hostage as an example, then order everyone to tie themselves up with rope. I murder anyone who doesn't tie themselves tight. Once they're all restrained, I set fire to the gymnasium, which I had doused in gasoline. I fail to get out in time and burn to death, too.

124,447th Time

The number of people at school drops to below half, perhaps proving that my previous plan was indeed effective. But my mind snaps again, and I kill myself out of guilt.

124,480th Time

I'm going so crazy I can't think, and it's happening more often. Some days, my body won't move, but on those days that it does, I always get rid of at least one student.

And at long last, I do away with the entire school.

And yet, this world *still* doesn't end. The school festival isn't going on, but the streets are still buzzing with people.

Do I have to kill them, too? Must I murder these innocent people and make them suffer?

This despair leads me to jump to my own death again. *Splat.*

124,481st Time

I killed Roo and my family. I'm throwing up, and I can't stop.

124,491st Time

I try hijacking an airplane so I can fly it into a skyscraper but fail before I even get on board. I bite off my tongue and kill myself.

124,502nd Time

This time, I hijack a packed train and run it off the rails. This proves more fruitful than anything so far. I'll try it again.

124,609th Time

I lie on my back on the rooftop. I'm not committing any massacres this time.

There aren't any fewer people. I've slaughtered so many, and yet they're still out there in throngs. It doesn't feel as if I'm even making a dent.

I've learned something after all these murders. I think we humans are more durable than I believed. Not on the level of cockroaches. But it doesn't matter if there's a cataclysm, or a horrible plague strikes, or if the earth becomes uninhabitable, or aliens invade, or the sun goes out—humanity's numbers might go down, but we will persevere without going extinct. If we survive, we will begin to propagate. You'll never get all of us. As someone who's been incessantly devoted to killing people, that's what I've realized.

People have gone back and forth debating whether human life is more important than the earth. It's an unanswerable question, but I still have an intuitive understanding of the solution. First off, life isn't important at all. It's a formless concept that exists only in the eye of an observer. This is not an idea born from a desire to justify my own actions. "Life" is founded on a large, spongy lump of a concept that isn't divided into individuals, and the discrete units of flesh from that mass are what we call "life." The source of life is simply found within each of us. It can't be created or stolen away. As long as the source of life exists, life will not decline or disappear.

I'm not asking anyone to understand me. I'm not even looking at the human species as one I belong to anymore. I'm no longer human.

Hope was lost to me long ago, but now that I'm aware of how inhuman and rotten I've become, I'm darker, more twisted, hollower, and lower. If I tip into despair at all, I will instantly break down and kill myself over and over.

I can't stop moving, though. My actions will lead me to the truth.

The red sky is now visibly full of fissures. I can practically hear it splitting.

I know I'm destroying this world.

But I'm also seeing hallucinations, so I can't tell whether those cracks in the red sky are real.

Piled into a mountain in the schoolyard are the corpses of the people I've slain, including the ones I love. I can't remember their names anymore, though. I've lost the ability to see people as people. They're all just meat. I am shit. A shitty pile of shit.

Splat.

—Huh? When did I jump? This habit is getting to be a real pain in the ass.

I don't die right away, however. I crawl around on the ground with my brains exposed to the air. It'd be great if my dreams and hopes fell out, but I never had any to begin with. Even if I did, I couldn't pick them up.

Blood pours out of me, and then—yes, I'm dead again.

124,611th Time

I finish eating some *tsukemen* noodles in Ikebukuro, then pull a chain saw out of a Boston bag and start cutting up the people in the shop. Once I've finished them off, I go into the street and walk around killing pedestrians. The pandemonium feels distant. The chain saw breaks when I cut a maid in half where she was attracting customers. The crowd that had been running about trying to escape realizes that the chain saw has gone silent. The emboldened mob will probably catch me and lynch me. I'll kill myself before that. Unfortunately, I have trouble getting out the knife I use for offing myself. My entire body is drenched in blood, and I can't see anything. By the way, that roast pork I had with the noodles was supergood.

Someone lightly taps me on the shoulder.

Who is it? There's no one who would tap me. Nobody would come near me while I'm still covered in gore.

But it really is happening. I turn around, but no one's there. I can't see

anyone. So whoever it is is invisible. Yeah, I bet it's a monster. One that can kill me at any moment.

And yet, I know who this formless entity is.

Who? Who, who, who?

—Of course.

—It's me.

The world goes dark.

That invisible, formless monster enters my body with a shock like a piece of glass stabbing into my eye. Shame boils up inside me. I'm soaring through the cosmos, traveling the stars. My brain waves are distorted by a peculiar reddish noise. There is no sound. There never was. A sea of venomous insects. Poison coursing through my body. Numbed, I am suddenly surrounded by seamless walls of TV monitors. This maze displays the murders I've committed. *Stop it! Don't show me my sins! Don't make me look at this objectively!* I cry out, but the monitors don't go away. They display my many, many, seemingly infinite transgressions. The weight of my guilt crushes me. My innards pop out of me and break. My body scatters. Like caramel popcorn.

Abruptly, I understand.

This is the end. This is the end of me.

So will I meet her?

Will I meet Maria?

I open the curtains of this darkened world. And open them. And open them. Each time, the gloom over this cheaply built room actually gets darker somehow, and I am driven to desperation and take my own life repeatedly. I am killed by a delusion I cannot identify as a delusion.

And yet, the stars surround me. The earth spins in reverse.

Where is this?

Now I'm falling. The pit is bottomless. Falling and falling. How far does this hole go? Who dug it? This pit is so deep, it could hold all the corpses I've made.

I'll never reach the bottom. Never. Never.

At least not before an eternity passes.

My body was only accelerating during the long descent, and I slam into the ground and splatter again.

Splat.

I become chunks of meat.

Or so I think, but then my body is restored, and I repeat my fall. After an infinite amount of time, I reach the bottom, and my body splatters into so much flesh and gore.

Over and over, forever and ever.

Splat. Splat.

Splat. Splat. Splat. Splat. Splat.

That sound rings within my brain for an eternity, and yet I awaken.

“—Oh.”

I'm standing on a random street in Ikebukuro holding a broken chain saw, my entire body soaked in blood.

There is no air on this Ikebukuro street, though. No, wait, I am able to breathe. It's definitely lacking something, though. Something vital is missing.

Oh, I see.

There aren't any people.

Deafening silence. A ruin that isn't a ruin. A city that doesn't have what it should.

There's an impulse in my chest threatening to burn me hollow, and I cry out in pain. *What I've done can never be undone! What I've done can never be undone!* The taste of despair is on my tongue like green sputum. Unable to bear it, I run around the silent streets. There is no one on the once-crowded main thoroughfare. The city has been abandoned, left to its own devices.

This is crazy. I would find it easier to understand if the cityscape had just

vanished into a pitch-black void.

I run until I'm too tired to even move. I rest my weight on a car stopped in the middle of a five-way intersection.

"Huff...huff...huff..."

As I catch my breath, the empty streets force me to look at them. They leap into my eyes to convey the truth.

I've eliminated all the people.

"—Ha, ha-ha."

I made it.

I made it to the end of the world.

I didn't kill off all the people on the planet. It's just that the Misbegotten Happiness constantly presented me with a "happy world." My string of suicides and murders consistently prevented me from experiencing that happiness.

The Misbegotten Happiness has finally broken down due to my handiwork.

"I did it... I did it..."

Now—

I won't even have to see that false happiness.

I will never be able to escape despair; I will never find joy even using a Box.

"Ahhh—!!"

I'm so excited, I might puke out everything in my stomach. I want to revel innocently in my despair and dance while I crush out my eyes. I wash my face with my gushing tears and snot, making it sticky. Before I know it, I'm hitting my legs so hard, they've gotten swollen.

I am all alone in the world.

124,612th Time

My mission should be complete. But I have yet to meet Maria, and I wake up,

as always, in the classroom before the school festival starts.

There is, of course, no one in it. Ever since Kokone vanished, there hasn't been a recorder in my hand.

I walk the school building. The school feels unnatural with its preparations for a festival that has no participants. It's as if I've wandered into a diorama. There is no sound aside from my footsteps. I don't see any signs of life; not even a ghost could slip in here. I walk around the school as carefully as someone reading a novel one letter at a time.

There aren't any people.

No matter how much I now wish that there were, there are no people.

This repeating world was full of similar experiences. Time accelerated and became less and less dense, with a single day passing like the three-minute wait for a cup of instant noodles. Now that there's no one here, though, time has transformed into something monstrous. It's slowed enormously. Without my sense of time, each minute feels like an hour.

The swollen time constricts my chest, almost suffocating me. And that isn't all; the once-formless concept now has an edge that slices me up like a *kamaitachi* whirlwind. Or so it seems, until the next moment is heavy enough to crush me. It pulls at my body and stretches it like a rubber doll. I shudder. When will my limbs be cut away, my organs smashed, my head torn off?

And what's most frightening of all is that these are all sensory illusions. I can describe them with a single word: "Loneliness."

I exit the school. The trains aren't running. There are empty train carriages at the station. I get on one of the bicycles left nearby and head home. There's no one there. Of course there isn't. I killed Roo and the rest to remove them from this world long ago.

It makes sense, but I can't accept it.

All of a sudden, I can't let this be.

I want to see faces.

I want to see *someone*.

On a bicycle, I head to places where there might be people.

A commercial strip.

—No one.

An amusement park.

—No one.

A shopping mall.

—No one.

A domed stadium.

—No one.

—No one. No one. No one. No one. No one. No one. No one. No one. No one. No one.

Maria's apartment.

—No one.

I decide to hang myself here today.

124,622nd Time

I'm trapped inside the Misbegotten Happiness that I'd believed was broken. Even after ten more loops, I'm still the only person in the world. I've still been taking my own life during this time, naturally.

I cross over a large bridge to reach the neighboring prefecture. Ever since the people disappeared, I've been spending my days walking around—*but to what end?* I'm looking for people. *What will I do if I find any?* I have to be alone. I must kill everyone alive, with no exceptions. *Kill them?* Yes, kill them. *Even when they've finally seen me?* No one can be here if I want to see Maria. *But I want someone to see me, right?* Yes, I want someone to see me.

I want to talk to someone. I don't care who; I just want to talk. I want to be sure I'm here. So it doesn't matter who. It doesn't matter if they're awful. I need someone to respond. Being alone means losing everything in its truest

sense. Now. Let me out of this world now. Is it still, still not broken enough? I pull out a knife and cut my body to shreds. This isn't good enough? No, it probably isn't.

My consciousness drifts away, and I die again.

124,628th Time

—*Clang, clang, clang, clang, clang, clang, clang, clang, clang.*

Loneliness. The assault is different from what I had imagined. I thought the hopelessness it brought would quietly seep into me.

But it doesn't. This attack is much more violent and direct. It hammers me on the head like a metal pole. *Clang, clang.*

—*Clang, clang, clang, clang, clang, clang, clang, clang, clang, clang, clang, clang, clang, clang, clang, clang, clang, clang.*

It hurts. Please stop. I vomit and weep; it's too much. How many times has it been? That bastard Loneliness won't let up, though. It beats on me until my consciousness is lost to the wind. When that happens, I leap through time. And when I leap, I find it difficult to make it back.

I've been assigned a series of trials in the Misbegotten Happiness. I killed myself more times than I can count, committed an unfathomable number of murders. I even took the lives of those I love. These days have been so painful; this ordeal has not been easy. However, it's also true that I've grown accustomed to the suffering bit by bit, that the pain has dulled.

It's different with loneliness, though. Its crushing weight grows greater with every cycle. I can't even develop an immunity to it.

I will continue to think. If I don't, then the person who is me will disappear with no one to observe me. I try to think meaningful thoughts, but that's difficult, too. There is no meaning when there isn't anyone else here. Loneliness snatches away even my capacity for thought. Meaningless. It's all meaningless. I'm meaningless. I can pretend otherwise for only so long by counting prime

numbers in my head.

I've already tried not killing myself once, thinking maybe everything would reset. I hoped to erase all the memories I'd carried over, knowing full well that it would undermine everything I have fought for all this time. In other words, I was defeated. I yielded to the loneliness.

But I still have this world to myself even if I don't commit suicide. The moment I awaken, the violent shock of the loneliness leaps at me and revives my memory. There is no escape from this solitude. It won't leave me alone even when I'm beaten. It's still constantly feeding me its lethal dose of poison.

124,645th Time

I've decided to hop onto a midsize motorcycle and travel the world in search of people.

I'm deluded to believe I'm still holding on to my mind. I'm deluded to believe someone else remains in this world. I'm deluded to believe that just maybe that someone is Maria. These delusions are what keep me alive. Lose them, and I am finished. I will never be able to think again. If I don't keep embracing these delusions, I will become living stone.

And there is no coming back from that death.

I accelerate the bike. Though I know there's no point in speeding up, the looming loneliness pushes roughly at my back, driving me faster and faster.

Unable to make a turn, I crash into a guardrail.

I am thrown off the bike and break my left leg, which now bends forward. Terrifyingly enough, however, I don't feel any pain. There is no point to perceiving pain in a world with no people, so my brain has taken the initiative to shut down that function.

I try to shriek in fear.

But no sound comes out because I've forgotten how to scream.

124,750th Time

I can no longer ride a motorcycle. My mind isn't capable of operating advanced instruments. My brain shouldn't be able to physically waste away, since this world preserves my body as it was, and yet my intelligence is clearly deteriorating. I'm having problems reading and writing kanji characters. My consciousness comes and goes, and I can't recall how many loops it's been since I became alone, though I try.

My energy level is in an even more dangerous state. I'm losing the ability to walk around in search of people, even though I still want to. More and more, I finish the day unable to move from the classroom where I awaken.

My memories of the past are slipping away. I don't know who I am. I barely know my name. Kazuki Hoshino. K-A-Z-U-K-I H-O-S-H-I-N-O. But I can't recall what type of person I was, what my social standing was, what I liked, what I disliked, or what I've been living for.

I can only occasionally remember the names of my friends. Mogi—I remember that last name but can't always come up with the first name that goes with it. I know whoever it was was dearly important to me. The name Haruaki once left my mouth unexpectedly, but I can't conjure up the face.

I'm sure language will be lost to me soon, too. It's scary to think about, but there's nothing I can do. I've long since forgotten how to make proper facial expressions. Even if there were someone to see me, I'm sure they wouldn't have any idea what I'm thinking.

Still.

Still, if there's one thing I must never forget, it's this.

I shout.

"Maria!

"Maria!

"Maria!"

Strangely enough, the chant causes my body to spring into action of its own

volition. This isn't my own will at work here; my mind and body are divided. I merely observe the me who's moving on its own. It's like watching video from a camera controlled by someone else.

Where is my body going? No matter where it goes, it's meaningless. There is no meaning in a vacant world. Where could it go?

The familiar path leads it to the apartment building where Maria once lived. I climb the emergency stairwell and reach room 403. I insert the spare key. I always keep it in my pocket even in this state.

The scent of peppermint hangs in the apartment. My senses are playing with me. There's nothing in these rooms to create that odor. This fragrance is simply a fantasy brought on by my memories.

But real or fake, the scent still soothes me.

It grants me hope.

124,753rd Time

Since then, I've been heading to Maria's apartment as soon as I wake up at school.

I arrive, breathe in the peppermint scent, and gain peace.

It's a repetition of that.

125,589th Time

Wake up at school.

Go to Maria's house.

"Maria."

Maybe I say "Maria." Not sure if it comes out right.

Arrive at apartment. Scent is there. Can't remember the name, but it's

Maria's smell.

I cry.

Maria, why aren't you here? I'm lonely. I miss you. Please come out. It's all I wish for. I miss you. I miss you. I miss you.

—*Bang, bang!*

Hit the wall. Answer me. Let me hear your voice, even just a little. Please. While I can still use words.

—*Bang, bang!*

Fists start to bleed. Don't care. Can't feel pain anyway.

—*Bang, bang!*

—*Bang, bang!*

125,770th Time

Walk. Always same place. Hit wall.

—*Bang, bang!*

Miss you.

Not many words left; not much time left to use them.

Miss you.

126,779th Time

—*Bang, bang!*

—*Bang, bang!*

127,888th Time

—*Bang, bang!*

“I really am impressed.”

—*Bang, bang!*

“...Oh. This is the first time I’ve appeared in approximately three hundred fifty years from your perspective, but you won’t spare me a second glance. You probably can’t tell who I am, let alone recognize someone else’s presence. Your mind is completely shattered, language is lost to you, you can’t even think, and you have no will. Yet, you keep hitting that wall. It’s futile, but you keep going solely for the sake of your ardent wish to see Maria Otonashi. ‘Insane’ is the only word I can find for it. You’re less than an animal; your mind is gone. How are you able to keep pounding that wall? I suppose you’re like an insect seeking out food. For you, seeking Maria Otonashi is equivalent to a biological need.”

—*Bang, bang!*

“You wounded your own soul, even changed your nature as a human, just to find her.”

—*Bang, bang!*

“You are a truly terrifying foe, but this can’t last forever. Even the soul has its limits. When it is worn away, when your fixation on Maria Otonashi disappears, this world meant for you will become a void. I’ll watch until it happens.”

—*Bang, bang!*

“...It is annoying, though.”

—*Bang, bang!*

—*Bang, bang!*

128,000th Time

—*Bang, bang, bang, bang.*

130,000th Time

—Bang, bang, bang, bang, bang, bang, bang, bang, bang, bang, bang, bang, bang, bang, bang!

“I can’t believe this. It still won’t end. It really is annoying. It’s grating on my ears.”

140,000th Time

—Bang, bang!

—Bang, bang!

“...I shudder to even think it, but is there no end to this? Will you never stop? You can still bang on that wall? This goes beyond the behavior of an animal or a machine or even a substance. All things eventually break. It’s not even that of a god. Deities transform over time. And yet you’re still here hitting the wall.”

—Bang, bang!

“What are you?”

—Bang, bang!

“Who are you?”

150,000th Time

—Bang, bang!

“I am the embodiment of this Box. There is no escape. Nor can I escape from your banging on the wall.”

—Bang, bang!

“I am not human, and yet might I be worn down first? Will I, power personified and gifted with an intellect, lose a battle of endurance?”

200,000th Time

—*Bang, bang!*

—*Bang, bang!*

“Just stop already.”

—*Bang, bang!*

—*Bang, bang!*

“I said stop!”

—*Bang, bang, bang, bang!*

“Are you really trying to make a hole in the wall? That’s impossible. It’s like trying to split the earth in two with a shovel. If you manage to break through by hitting this wall, there would be only one word for that.”

—*Bang, bang, bang, bang!*

—*Bang, bang, bang, bang!*

“A miracle.”

400,000th Time

—*Bang, bang!*

“...Well, I never would have anticipated this turn of events. I can no longer maintain my form. I don’t know if this will make you happy, but when it comes to this contest between us—”

—*Bang, bang!*

“—you win.”

I.

—*Bang, bang!*

Will.

—*Bang, bang!*

Not.

“Maria.”

Forget.

“Maria.”

I reach out.

■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■

I would probably find peace if I let you go. I might lose you, but I could probably live. No matter which path I choose, though, all my actions are for your sake. In the end, I will still search for you. I don't care that I'll lose everything for you, that the people of the world hate me, that I'll receive nothing for my efforts and you'll never be mine. All I want is to keep walking straight ahead. That's all I *can* do. This may seem like an abnormal fixation to someone else. It may even seem supernatural. To me, though, it's a very mundane, obvious thing. It's also not special to anyone aside from me. Some people notice, some people don't, and I'm just one of the former. I'm one of the ones who learned that wishes can come true even without Boxes. The ones who know the significance of a wish coming true. That's the only difference.

Pursuing you with all my heart is painful. There's never a day that I find it easy. I rage, lament, and rejoice for you. I break my heart, my body, and the world because of you. But those moments when my fingers brush against a fragment of you are the only moments I can say I'm alive.

Even if you will not be mine in the end...that will not change.

Even though I know the horrible outcome...that will not change.

I will seek out the Maria within me.

I will disappear. Maybe this is an end I brought on myself by holding on to such an unexpected wish? To be honest, I feel it would've been better if I'd never met you. But if I could choose between a life where I met you and a life where I didn't, I would choose the one that brought us together. I would choose it over and over again. I would choose it wholeheartedly. Even though it's led to nothing but worry and confusion, nothing but regret and questions of how it

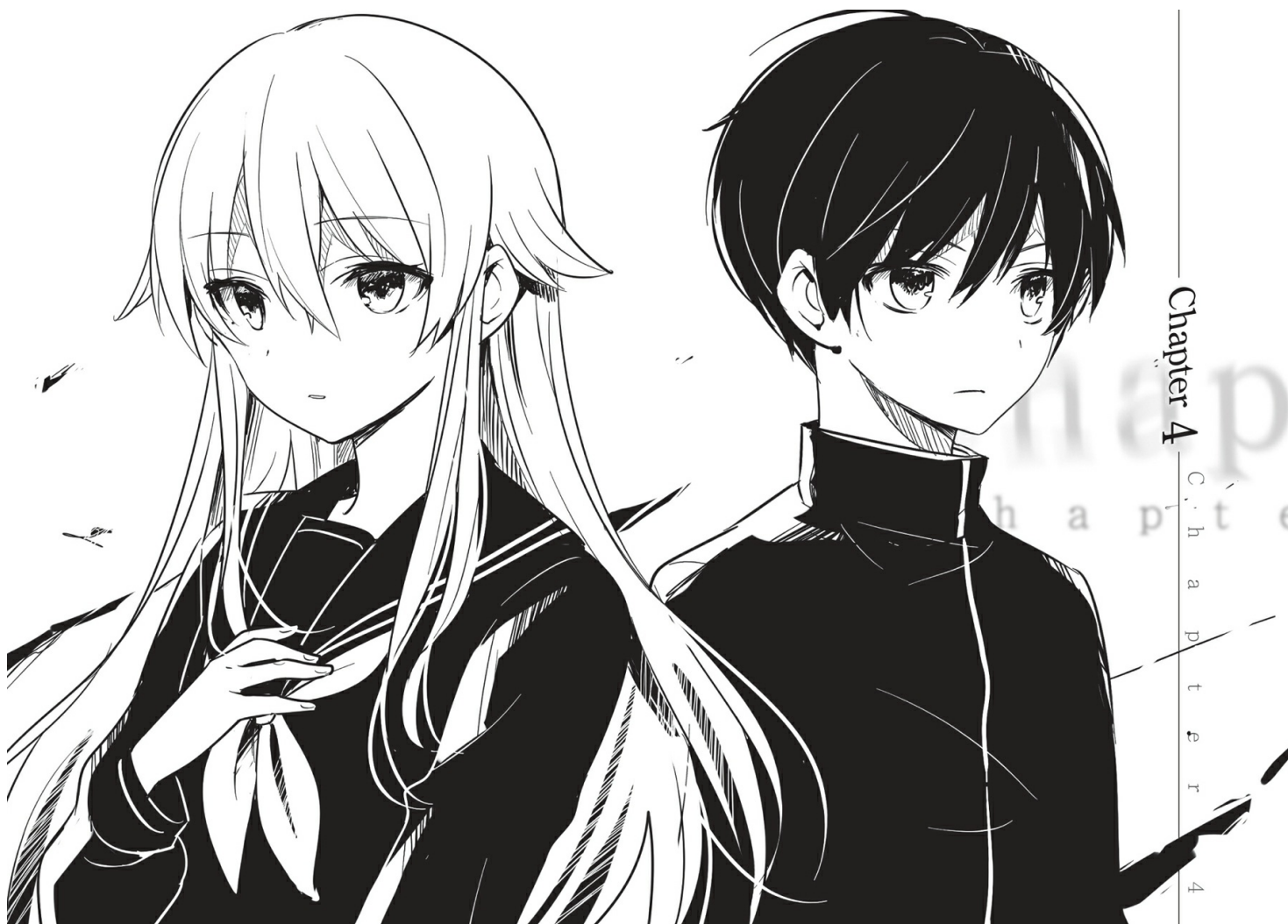
came to this.

I'm sure that when I vanish, I will meet my end unfulfilled.

But I'm not enough of a philosopher to say I'm fine with that.

I still dream, even now.

I dream that I might receive some small reward—that I might get a happy ending.



—*Bang, bang!*

I think I might've gone crazy. Ever since I woke up in the hotel after I destroyed His and Her Mirrored Terminus, I've been hearing this sound like banging on a wall. This hallucination has gone on for a week.

If I keep ignoring it, I get the feeling I will reach the point of no return.

I'm hesitant, but in the end, I decide to go toward it. It may be strange to play along with a hallucination, but I don't think it's something I can ignore.

It sounds as if it's coming from right next to my ears, but I can never seem to reach the source. I follow it through two prefectures. After several train transfers, I arrive in a fairly nondescript suburb. The station plaza is starting to look a little run-down.

It's a commonplace view, and yet it feels horribly familiar to me. Maybe I used to live here once. Of course, that means nothing to me, since I've lost my memory—or it shouldn't.

—*Bang, bang!*

That noise is gradually getting louder. I'm definitely getting nearer to its point of origin.

I walk through streets I know yet can't remember. My feet stop in front of a relatively new apartment building made of brick. No doubt about it. The sound is coming from one of these rooms. I follow the noise up the emergency stairs.

Yes...I'll see them soon.

Um, see who?

The sound is coming from room 403. I put my hand on the doorknob and find that it's unlocked. Bracing myself, I open the door.

And I immediately see someone.

"O!" I shout.

That alien being slowly turns toward me and smiles, suggesting they knew I would come here.

"What're you up to...?"

O has taken the form of a woman with long black hair. She looks close to the same age as me, but it's hard for me to think so when she has such incomparable beauty to go with her bewitching aura.

She almost looks a little like me.

—*Bang, bang!*

Incredibly enough, I can hear the knocking coming from within O.

"...Is this sound some trick of yours? What are you after? Did you want to bring me here? This is an awfully roundabout method..."

I notice something. O's form is growing faint, if only ever so slightly. Darkness has started creeping up her feet, and her expression is just a bit irritated.

O approaches me as I struggle to figure out what's going on.

"Maria."

I frown. O has never called me by my name, as if we're friends. And yet, this all seems terribly familiar.

An unidentifiable emotion catches me off guard.

O gently cups my cheeks in her hands.

"I always wanted to be with you. I always wanted to be with you, Maria."

"...What're you saying?"

"But it would appear that's not possible anymore. You have to accept it. It's time."

"...Tell me what you mean!" I shout back. O isn't making any sense.

O gazes at me with utter tenderness. "It's time to give up."

"...What?"

"It's time to renounce the wish."

I'm even more bewildered now. "Wh-what're you...? I wished to bring happiness to everyone in the world. I'll never renounce that wish."

This is just another verbal attack.

Still, I don't brush O's hands from my cheeks. I've endured every painful trial, disregarded every warning, in pursuit of my wish—and yet I can't shrug off the suggestion.

—*Bang, bang, bang, bang!*

The pounding on the wall within O is growing even louder.

"We have been defeated."

"...Defeated? Who have we lost to?"

O doesn't answer, only smiles. As if I already know the answer, and there's no need to tell me.

"Maria. You can't avert your eyes from the past anymore."

The kindly admonishing smile—

"—Oh."

I make the connection. I realize whose form O has adopted.

"Stop... Don't... Don't mess with me..."

The past forces its way into my mind.

The past.

The past.

I shake my head, desperately driving it away. I don't want it. I don't want this. Don't want to see this. Don't want to know this. *Don't want to remember this.*

However, O doesn't let go and presses her hands even harder against my face.

"Maria, you must not fight. Your enemy is too powerful; don't resist. You don't stand a chance. I know that all too well now. You'll be completely defeated."

The name of this enemy won't come to mind.

But I'm positive it's one I know. I know he would use his friends and himself just to crush my wish.

What's more frightening, though, is the warmth filling my chest anyway.

As I stand stunned and frozen with fear, O wraps me in an embrace. I can't shake her off.

Yes... She shouldn't smell this way, but that mix of perfumes and essential oils drifts into my nose. This scent from the past, this scent I love, is— —the scent of my older sister, Aya.

“See you around, Maria.”

I slowly sink into my sister's body, into Aya Otonashi, like a fly caught in a spider's web. Reduced to small pieces, I slip into her.

This is my sacred world. No one should be able to trespass here.

But.

There's a sound.

—*Bang, bang!*

—*Bang, bang!*

I'm falling. Falling. Slowly falling. But the bottom is still very distant. It feels as if I'm deep beneath the sea, but it's still bright. The water is perfectly transparent; even small bubbles are clearly visible. It is pure and right, without any irrationality. Yes, is there anywhere more comforting? Yes, it's cold and suffocating, but this is my utopia.

[illegible]

As I sink, I unintentionally brush against a certain small world. Light swells around me and pulls me inside.

Maybe it's arrogant of me to say so, but I'm floating over the world, looking down like a god.

Within it is a happy couple. This is a tiny realm meant for only the two of them.

The pair is huddled together on the edge of a small lake. The lake is surrounded by a lush, green forest, and wild birds are singing in the distance. The water's surface glitters in the sunlight as if to bless the lovers.

Yes, it may be flawed, but the happiness of this world is undeniable.

"Hmm?"

I had forgotten about the two of them as a side effect of using the Misbegotten Happiness, but I remember now. Maybe it's because I'm seeing them here before me, or maybe more because I am inside the Box. I used the Misbegotten Happiness on these two in the real world.

Nana Yanagi and Toji Kijima. They had been in a relationship, but by the time I encountered them, it was falling apart. There were too many problems between them. The idea of a breakup had hurt them immensely, especially Nana Yanagi. She had even considered just killing Toji Kijima if their relationship was going to end. Even if I had prevented her from committing a brutal crime, Nana Yanagi's underlying issues would have remained unresolved. Thinking there would be no release from this pain for the two of them, I used the Misbegotten Happiness.

I saved them and let them live in this perfect world.

"This is it...! This is the peace I wanted to give them!"

Nothing bad will happen here. There's nothing here that isn't beautiful. The love in their hearts for each other will remain pure and undistorted.

My Box is flawed, which is why it can create only these small, enclosed realms. But if I can perfect it, then my wish will become reality.

(I won't let you.)

"Huh...?"

That voice sounded as if it was coming from right inside my head.

—*Splorch.*

A grotesque, foreign substance drops into this world of beautiful things.

"What is that?"

Nana Yanagi inclines her head quizzically at the anomaly.

It's a dark-red lump of flesh that resembles an organ. It pulsates unnervingly, much like a heart. *Ba-dum, ba-dum, ba-dum.*

"Whoa... Freaky. What is it?"

But she doesn't have much time to wonder. With incredible speed, the throbbing dark-red mass grows big enough to fill the tiny lake.

"E-ew... Yuck, augh, this is so gross!"

The mass rots the vegetation of the forest, pollutes the water into mud, and lunges for the couple. Screaming, the two of them are engulfed.

In the span of a single moment, this world of beautiful things becomes a single gruesome mass.

"...What the hell is this?"

It all comes to an end while I'm trapped in disbelief. The dream I envisioned is ruined. This world of lost happiness shatters, and I am cast out into the bright ocean depths.

"...What happened? What's going on...?"

—*Bang, bang!*

It's that noise again. I turn around and see a shadow in the shape of a person on the bottom. It's faint, with a wavering, indistinct form that would probably scatter with a touch.

(Ah... Ah...)

That voice sounds like the one in my head from just a second ago.

"Was it you? Were you the one who destroyed that world?"

(No more.)

"What?"

(No more.)

I listen closely for a moment, but the shadow doesn't say anything else.

I try reaching for it. It disperses easily and vanishes.

“...What is it?”

I know this isn't something I created. It's weak, but I'm fairly certain it's the source of the glob that destroyed that happy world.

I survey my surroundings. I hadn't noticed earlier because I was focused on that beautiful realm, but there are human-shaped shadows all around me.

When I strain my ears, I can hear voices.

(Help me...) (I'm lonely.) (I don't want to be by myself; I hate being alone.) (Anyone, please.) (Just kill me.) (Stopstopstopstopstop.) “...Seriously, what is this...?”

There is nothing but pain in the voices of the many silhouettes.

I'm trying to figure out what they are when a bright flash fills my vision, pulling me into another miniature world. Once again, I'm watching it from above.

This one is a quiet, spacious park. There's a wheat field nearby glittering like gold. In the center of the park, a mixed group of three about middle school age are playing catch. The only one who isn't very good at it is the girl in glasses with black hair. The two boys are gently tossing the ball to her in an easy arc, but she still can't seem to catch anything. Still, the trio keeps laughing; apparently, this is fun for them.

I can tell from the glances between the girl and the charismatic, handsome boy that they have feelings for each other. The other tall boy watches the two of them contentedly.

Ah, I see; this is—

“Daiya Oomine's happy place.”

Oomine became an owner in an attempt to transform the world by forcing the ignorant masses to confront their guilt, but he failed. He committed several crimes along the way and eventually drove himself to the brink. While he was trying to find a way to atone, Oomine was stabbed by a girl who had become a fanatical believer because of his Box.

I used the Misbegotten Happiness on him when he was on the verge of death.

The other two playing this game of catch are Kokone Kirino and Haruaki Usui as they were in middle school. I understand that now. Oomine and I collaborated for the sake of our wishes, but changing the world wasn't his true desire. He wanted something simple: for Kokone Kirino to be able to smile as she was here at this moment.

That wish is continually being granted here.

In the real world, this would no longer be possible. Oomine is probably beyond help, and given how wounded Kirino's heart is already, she would probably never recover if she learned how he died. If Usui ever saw what happened to the two he cares so much about, he would suffer for a long time, too.

Reality is too merciless, too cruel.

This sweet, eternal dream brings unfathomable bliss.

Yes, but still—

“Are you trying to tell me to look at reality?!”

—*Splorch*.

It happens again. Another grotesque, alien body falls into this happy world.

“Stop... Stop...”

A Box is the only way to realize this happiness—stop destroying it!

“Oomine is your friend, right? You know that this Oomine needs this Box, even if it isn't perfect! You know that, don't you?! So please stop... I'm begging you!”

I shout.

“Kazuki!”

I shout his name.

“Ohhh...”

Yes. I remember.

This is my enemy.

“Hmm? What’s that?”

By the time the middle school Oomine with unpierced ears notices the object, the blob of flesh is already swelling up.

The once-golden-hued wheat rots on contact with the dark-red mound of meat, turning dull. The dirt of the field changes completely, becoming something like a swamp. The sky darkens to purple. The fleshy glob catches the trio and traps them. They scream, but the dark-red substance continues to expand. Finally, it swallows them up, filling the world with its freakish mess.

This world is done for, too.

Daiya Oomine’s happy place is gone.

I am cast out onto the seabed again.

“...Why, Kazuki...?”

There’s another wavering, indistinct silhouette before me. This isn’t the real Kazuki, but I now know it has some relation to him.

“Stop playing around...! What are you? What will ruining the happiness of others accomplish?!”

I confront it with rage, but the shadowy figure says only one thing.

(It hurts, it hurts, it hurts.)

Once more, the form disperses easily under my touch. My words probably aren’t reaching Kazuki in this state.

“...Kazuki. What have you done within this Box? What are you doing now...?”

I look around me. The creepy shadows are converging upon me like carp swarming around food.

But this multitude is only meaninglessly repeating the same phrases.

(No... No...) (Help me.) (Kill me.) (I’m lonely.) (I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry.) (Someone, someone look at me.) (Nnnnnnnnnnngh.) (I want to see you.) (Maria.)

(Maria.)

(Maria.)

Gritting my teeth, I shake them off.

That is enough to scatter the shadows.

I keep sinking through the deep sea. It goes on forever.

Just how long have I been drifting through this ocean? So much time has passed already.

I have been drawn into tiny worlds filled with joy many times. Each one of them is a soothing place with unending laughter. But every one of them, without exception, has been annihilated by a disgusting blob of dark-red flesh.

At first, watching it filled me with anger. *Why is Kazuki doing such a thing? Does he really want to stand in my way so badly?* But that emotion gradually changed to fear. When I started considering how he was doing it at all, I realized that an incredible madness lay behind his method. Then I began to worry. *If Kazuki is doing this...is he okay? Has he managed to stay sane?*

I whisper this as I watch the worlds being consumed and broken by the red-black masses of flesh: “Kazuki... I want to speak with you.”

I want to know what he’s thinking, what he’s doing.

I thought I would sink through this abyss forever, but even it has a bottom. The water isn’t clear anymore; it’s beginning to stagnate and cloud with a black, sticky darkness like coal tar. All the negativity this Box has created gathers down here as sediment. The condensed negativity forms the ocean floor.

There’s another small world here.

This one created the abnormality in the depths that has caused the negativity to settle.

Steeling myself, I enter this tiny realm.

It happens the moment I arrive. I can sense that the air in this world is different from the others. My skin is prickling with pain, as if there are minuscule grains of sand suspended within the atmosphere, and the sky is stained red, as if blood has spilled across it. The ground is littered with those dark-red lumps of meat from the very beginning. But these don’t grow or

pulsate as they did in the other worlds.

As before, I am an onlooker here as well. I hover overhead as something approaches me. It's a distortion in space, as if the air has pooled together into something vaguely human shaped.

(Maria.)

That voice, the name it calls me by.

"Kazuki! Is that really you?!"

But this is how the "pool" responds.

(Unfortunately, I can't have a conversation with you. I can only speak my part. This is a message I left you in case you ever came. Well, I didn't leave it intentionally, so maybe you could call it a residual thought?) "What is this place? ...Oh yeah, we can't interact."

(The first thing you're probably going to ask is what this place is, right? This is what should have been my happy world keeping me trapped in the Misbegotten Happiness.) Without any further explanation, the "pool" begins to lead me somewhere else. I follow it quietly.

It stops directly above a school.

I look down and observe. Just like in the other miniature worlds, I have a supernatural view of this place. The sensation is so peculiar that I can't really describe it, but suffice to say, I'm able to perceive the entirety of this realm.

I used to go to this school, and it's livelier than usual. It seems there's a school festival going on. The students are completing the final preparations in an energetic hubbub, and I recognize some of them.

I also spot Oomine and Kirino. The two of them remained close in this world, too. Before I can get too sentimental, I quickly search for other people.

One person in particular.

"Kazuki!"

I spot him as he leaves the school building.

"—Ah."

Pitifully, just seeing him makes my chest leap and my heartbeat quicken. I can't do away with my desire for contact with him, no matter how he treats me. I want him to notice me and turn my way.

Then I realize something. Kazuki is pushing a wheelchair.

The girl sitting in it is Kasumi Mogi. The two of them are happily exploring the school festival like a new couple.

“.....”

Complicated feelings swirl within me. When I really think about it, I can see why Mogi should be the one beside him. She had always intended to admit her feelings to Kazuki. Mogi would probably have been able to bring him around and start a relationship with him even with the car accident, and even without a Box.

“That's...right...”

I'm not what Kazuki needs.

I'm not what anyone needs.

“A world without me is one where Kazuki can be happy. No—”

In fact, I'm in his way.

Kazuki did always believe that the normal day-to-day of life could dispel any despair.

What destroyed his way of thinking, what drove him to madness, was the foreign body worming its way into his life. The presence that brought Boxes near him.

In short—

“My presence made Kazuki miserable.”

That's why I've never deserved to be with him.

But even though I understand this, neither the “pool” nor this world releases me. Somberly, I watch Kazuki and Mogi go through the school festival.

The festival ends, and then a bonfire starts. The students begin to dance when “Turkey in the Straw” plays. Kazuki and Mogi gaze gently at the flickering

flames.

Then Mogi slowly takes Kazuki's hand, as softly as if she were trying to catch a bubble, and looks him in the eye. "I love you, Kazu."

Kazuki peers intently into her eyes and eventually answers with a smile. "I love you, too, Mogi."

She gives him the greatest smile in the world. "Let's stay together forever."

"We will."

There's nothing left for me to see here.

Kazuki's happiness lies here. So it would be best if I left without saying anything.

I look at the "pool" that's still nearby.

"That's enough. Put me back in the abyss."

The "pool" doesn't respond, though.

"Relax. I'll stay away from you. I won't hate you, even if you have broken the Misbegotten Happiness beyond all repair. Actually, if anyone deserves to be hated, it's me. You should forget me and start over. I won't change, though. Even if the Misbegotten Happiness is destroyed, I'll keep looking for a way to make the people of the world happy."

I don't expect a response, but the "pool" speaks up anyway.

(Maria, I bet you've got some naive idea in your head. You probably believe I'm happy spending my life with Mogi, so you should step aside. Well, you're wrong.) "What?"

(Don't underestimate my insanity.)

The world is suddenly bleached white, blinding me with its brightness.

"...What happened?"

The scenery returns to normal. The sky is still red, and the dark-crimson lumps of flesh are in the same spots on the ground.

Something feels off, though. The fire burning in the schoolyard has vanished,

and the students are back to their preparations for the school festival.

Before too long, I finally comprehend the situation.

“Did time rewind? Are we repeating the day of the festival...?”

Kazuki, pushing a wheelchair, appears in my line of sight again.

“Does it not simply end with him finding happiness?”

As an observer, my perception of time in this world is different from Kazuki’s as he experiences it. If I had to put it in words, it’s like watching a computer game where even watching the passage of considerable amounts of time is not tiring.

I end up witnessing Kazuki’s intimate moment with Mogi a multitude of times. I listen to her confession, and his acceptance of it, repeatedly.

I know how I feel about Kazuki. He is dear to me, and I want to embrace him and make him mine. Every time I see Mogi and Kazuki expressing their feelings, my chest feels as if it’s being torn apart.

“What is this? Some sort of punishment? Are you getting revenge by showing me a happiness I will never have?” I ask the “pool,” but as before, it conveniently doesn’t reply.

“...No, it’s wrong of me to call it punishment. If Kazuki is happy, then I should be happy, too. My own feelings don’t matter.”

I keep watching. Mogi confesses, and Kazuki accepts. I’m gritting my teeth the whole time.

But as the “pool” said, it was only beginning.

The turning point comes at the tenth time.

Mogi confesses, and Kazuki answers with an anguished expression, “Wait until tomorrow.”

He flees into the school as if a ghost is chasing him. Unable to grasp what just happened, Mogi is left in wide-eyed shock.

Kazuki reappears on the roof after running through the building. Without a moment’s hesitation, he scrambles up the fence of the rooftop.

“...What is he thinking? Is he going to kill himself...? ...! I see; he’s noticed that this world repeats. So...”

Kazuki looks down and swallows, then whispers something.

“Maria.”

“——!!”

To meet me, Kazuki jumps, and his body perishes.

The world goes on, though. Kazuki seems to have kept his memories of the previous time, and he rushes out of the school without even speaking to Mogi and searches for me.

“Stop it, Kazuki...”

It’s no use doing any of that. He cannot find me. The fundamental concept this world is built on is that I’m not here. He should know that, too.

“You can be happy without me! Mogi is here. Haruaki and your friends are here. Everyone will support you. You’ll be happy if you stop looking for me. Just do it!”

Unable to track me down, Kazuki kills himself again to keep his memories.

His brains splatter as I watch.

Kazuki continues his futile hunt for me.

Until he finds me, he will keep killing himself and turning himself into a mound of flesh. A rational mind wouldn’t be capable of such awful deeds. As I suspected he would, Kazuki slowly goes mad, losing both reason and intelligence. Yet, he still persists in his search for me.

“Stop it!” I scream countless times, but it never reaches him.

Kazuki dies over and over as I watch.

As this happens, the sky grows increasingly red, and the number of deep-crimson lumps of meat rises. Finally, it dawns on me why the scenery is so bizarre, unlike the other tiny worlds of joy.

The one staining the sky with blood is none other than Kazuki himself. He’s also the one producing those dark-red masses on the ground. As Kazuki

continues to die, he chips away at the meaning of this place.

He's been going through this same set of actions since before I saw it. This isn't the first time he's recovered his memory, nor is it the first time he's killed himself over and over because of it.

This is his rebellion against the Misbegotten Happiness, and the effects of all these attacks on its contentment aren't confined to this minuscule world. The main Box itself is being damaged and broken, bit by bit. These dark-red gobs of flesh swarming the worlds of Oomine and the others are one of the repercussions.

It's an act of violence, like a suicide bombing.

A rampage that will never lead to happiness.

"...What will it take for you to stop?"

There are times where Kazuki stops the suicides, stops retaining his memory, and finds a little modicum of joy in a relationship with Mogi, but it never lasts for long. In the end, he always figures out that this world is on repeat and starts killing himself over and over again to hold on to his memories. This cycle continues endlessly.

It's hell.

Both for the one experiencing it and the one watching it.

But the architect of this hell is none other than me.

"...The happiness I longed for..."

Is this really it? Is it possible that one missed button while it was being fastened together could lead to such a distortion?

If so, then this Box might as well—

No, let's not jump to conclusions here. Everyone else aside from Kazuki spent their time here smiling and laughing without even noticing the cheap facade.

Kazuki is the exception. He has a special something that clued him in to the superficial nature of this place and drove him to take things this far.

"I don't understand... What could it be?"

His feelings for me? I can't say these actions are doing much to help me, though. It would be better if he just forgot about me instead of torturing my mind like this. That's how I honestly feel. I would enter that hell if I could trade places with him. Kazuki's suffering pains me more than any torment I might experience.

I'm sure Kazuki knows this about me, too.

"Kazuki... You have to realize. No one wants this. It's not too late. Forget about me and take happiness for yourself."

But that "pool" speaks up for the first time in a while. The reply almost seems to slip out of its mouth.

(This is still just the beginning.)

I'm dumbfounded, but as it turns out, that was no lie or exaggeration.

Kazuki's hell evolves in the worst possible way, becoming an inferno that tortures him in every manner imaginable.

Kazuki ultimately starts committing the worst kinds of atrocities. He kills Mogi. He kills his friends. He kills his family. He kills law-abiding citizens who are complete strangers to him.

By killing people and removing them from the world, he's trying to make it into a place where happiness cannot exist.

For this Kazuki, the murders are a form of self-mutilation even more vicious than suicide. Doing this means that even if he does get out of the Box, his mind won't be intact. He'll spend all eternity condemning himself, unable to escape the guilt of his murders.

"Stop it... Kazuki, please stop..."

He probably understands this, too. And yet, he will keep on killing in order to reach me. He will not stop.

Kazuki's barbarous deeds are sending cracks into the world.

Yes... These cracks are my confusion. My faith in the Misbegotten Happiness is wavering.

After persisting with his slaughter, Kazuki succeeds in getting rid of all the people.

With no one else around, even the meaning of his self will vanish. A person's significance comes only when they're seen by others. Without a soul to see him, Kazuki is steadily losing his human faculties. He can't ride a motorcycle. He doesn't understand how to operate an elevator. He's unable to write. He's forgetting words.

Kazuki is losing his capacity to do anything.

"This is horrible..." I sigh. "He's...nothing. He's lost everything."

Though this is a fabricated world, Kazuki will never be the same again after he forfeits so much of his humanity. Even destroying the Misbegotten Happiness won't save him.

"He has nothing left. Even less than me."

Kazuki has been reduced to nothing, but he still heads straight to a certain place. He's likely not even aware anymore. He can't think. And yet, he always arrives at my apartment, calls for me, and single-mindedly beats against the wall. Over and over for an eternity, without ever knowing whether it will accomplish anything. More and more, he forgets my name and only hits the wall. His mind is gone. He's merely a machine acting as programmed by himself long ago.

—*Bang, bang.*

Oh...I see...

That sound in my head this whole time—it's the sound of Kazuki hitting the wall in an effort to reach me.

—*Bang, bang.*

He calls for me as his soul is worn away, leaving him hollow. Not even I can truly grasp how long it's been for him, pounding on that wall. That's how vast of a time span it's been. An entire lifetime isn't nearly enough. Kazuki has been pummeling away for what might as well be an eternity.

All just so he can see me.

Just for that!

“Ngh, aaah...”

Can't I do something about his feelings?

“Kazuki!” I scream. “Kazuki, I'm right here! Kazuki!”

I shout myself hoarse, despite knowing it's to no avail.

“Kazuki! Kazuki! Kazuki! Kazuki! Kazuki!”

I stand right in front of him, yelling his name over and over.

Unfortunately, Kazuki never pays me any heed.

I can't touch him, either.

It's an impassible gap. It's as if there's a Box specifically created to separate us from each other.

—*Bang, bang.*

Those sounds are like Kazuki's shrieks. *Help me; it hurts; no more.* All those figures I encountered in the depths are this curse come to life.

Kazuki should be able to stop at any time. He should have that freedom.

But he persists in hitting the wall, despite not knowing whether I can hear it. No, I don't think he can stop anymore.

“Kazuki...you're crazy. Insane. It's insanity to go this far just to see me!”

—*Bang, bang.*

“But.”

I have to admit it.

“But I'm happy, Kazuki.”

Of course I don't like that he is suffering. But there's another part of me that's glad to see he wants me so much. I'm aware it's a horrible thing to think, yet I can't repress the feeling.

“I was lonely after being by myself for so long. Nothing made me happier than having you beside me. That's how I truly felt. I guess you must have noticed,

and that's why you keep beating at the wall, thinking of me."

I try to touch Kazuki's head, but my hand passes through it.

“But I didn’t choose you. I left you for the sake of my wish to bring joy to everyone in the world. It was the only thing I could do to make sure my life still had meaning.”

And yet, here are the results. I am all that Kazuki has. He can't cut himself loose from me. All he can do is pursue me at the cost of himself.

It's my fault for not seeing his true nature.

“It’s fine. Meaning in life doesn’t matter anymore. I don’t care if I become something empty and meaningless... I can’t watch you lose yourself. I want to help you. After all, Kazuki, you...you...”

I brush my cheek at a sudden, strange sensation.

It's wet.

—These are tears.

"This can't be happening..."

I can't believe I still have the capacity to shed tears. I can't believe I still have such frailty in me.

But now that I know I do, the game is up.

“Ngh, aaah... Aaaah!”

Teardrops spill out one after the other.

“Kazuki... Kazuki... Kazukiii!!”

He has brought back the weakness I once discarded.

Kazuki has succeeded in transforming me.

Which means that I—

I—am not a Box anymore.

"Waaac

I'm human again.

“If I’m no longer a Box... If I don’t exist solely to grant wishes...”

I scream, weeping.

“Then I don’t care if my wish comes true anymore! So please, save Kazuki! I’m begging you, just save him! ...I hate this. Kazuki, I want to see you. I want to hear your voice. I want to feel warmth. I want your eyes on me. Look at me one more time. Kazuki... Kazuki... Kazuki...!”

—*Bang, bang, bang, bang, bang, bang!*

“Come back... Give me back that beautiful life! I can’t stand this. I hate it! I hate losing the ones I love! I hate becoming alone in the world! Please...please... let me be with...let me be with...Kazuki...Kazuki...!”

A thought comes to me out of the blue. What would I do if I were in Kazuki’s place?

I’m sure I would do exactly the same thing he’s doing.

Foolish as it seems, I would do the same.

Even though it would mean letting myself go to ruin, even though Kazuki wouldn’t want me to, even though it wouldn’t be to his benefit, I would throw everything away to see him.

I smile ruefully, still crying. “We’re...crazy. We’re completely nuts, huh, Kazuki?”

Despite everything, we will venture out to see each other again.

Despite everything, we will live holding each other close.

Why do we do this? I don’t know. I don’t know, but that’s all we have. There are no other options for us.

“There’s something special between us.”

“Something we’ve found.”

“Something far more precious than a wish.”

—*Bang, bang.*

“Can’t you hear my voice, Kazuki?”

—*Bang, bang.*

“You really can’t hear me? If so...”

—*Bang, bang.*

“...I’ll make it so you can.”

Wiping away my tears, I set my mouth in a straight line.

I’ve made up my mind.

I will destroy the Misbegotten Happiness.

And then I will meet Kazuki and stay at his side forever.

That won’t change even if the Kazuki beside me is an invalid.

—But is it possible?

This doesn’t just involve Kazuki. My own state is problematic. For the sake of my wish, I’ve been keeping my mind under a stress it can’t take. There’s no going back to what I once was, so it’s a question of severing the strained threads or stretching them as far as they can go and perhaps finding a use for them. In all likelihood, I will become an invalid, too, if I lose the Misbegotten Happiness along with any hope of obtaining another Box in the future. There’s no way we could stand together like that.

What should I do? If that’s how it is, what should I do?

(Find her.)

I open my eyes at the voice.

The “pool” is speaking to me.

(Find the zeroth Maria. Find the girl who’s crying.)

“...What’s the ‘zeroth Maria’? Will I really be able to be with Kazuki if I find her?”

The “pool” can’t respond, though. I can’t even tell if what it said is relevant to my situation.

But without any proof, I choose to believe its nebulous claim.

After all, it came from none other than Kazuki himself.

I return to the deep, clouded sea.

I notice it right away—why did I never notice before? Was it because the laughter that was drowning it out disappeared? Or because I simply didn't care to listen?

Either way, there is a voice I hadn't heard before.

A girl crying in the ocean depths.

Though I try my hardest to deny it, the timbre of the voice sounds like mine.

The sobs are coming from the deepest part of this abyss. These waters are filled with a black gloom, steeped in dark emotions. I have no idea what will become of me once the darkness overtakes me. I may drown in this ocean, never to escape again.

But I make the plunge without hesitation.

The weighty darkness clings to my body like wet concrete. I can't see even an inch in front of me. All around me is darkness, utter darkness. It hurts; it's disgusting; it itches; it terrifies me. But I will not stop. With only the sound of weeping to guide me, I feel my way deeper and deeper.

"Unh, urk...!"

Just as I start to wonder if I will sink forever, the gloom is suddenly dispelled.

A melancholy scene appears in the light.

"...This is..."

Yeah... I know this view. I could never forget it.

It's a seaside road with the smell of salt on the breeze. The asphalt is cracked on the poorly maintained street, and the guardrail is rusted red. Beneath the stony precipice is an unappealing view of the sea that no one would stop to look at. On the other side is a swell of dirt covered in weeds and thin, sad-looking trees.

This nearly abandoned road is where my family was taken from me.

But this isn't what it actually looks like here. It's not the view as I remember it, either. The reason why is that I saw it only after it was changed forever, once

the tow trucks had hauled off the two cars that had gone off the cliff.

So when I see the two vehicles breaking through the guardrail and plummeting from the cliff, I know the image is false. It's not the genuine article.

Every last detail is clearly defined, though. The texture of every object here has been re-created. This unforgettable waking vision is more real than reality.

The lives that will be lost before me are also real.

I extend my hand to help, but I'm an onlooker. I can't even touch them. All I can do is watch the car carrying my family fall from between my fingers. I'm powerless to do anything. The past cannot be changed.

My father and the person responsible for the wreck died instantly, and my mother passed without regaining consciousness. Aya Otonashi took her last breaths in an ambulance; she was awake, but she was bleeding uncontrollably. This is the past that can't be altered no matter what I do.

I saw this nightmare time and again until I lost my memory—no, even after it was gone. Except there's a figure here who never appeared in that awful dream.

It's me as I was in middle school. I'm standing beside the hole the cars created in the guardrail, weeping in a choked voice.

"...Why?" the girl softly asks, gazing down at the bottom of the cliff. "Why did you do this, Aya?"

The middle school me is looking at something—at her older sister covered in blood, her lower body crushed. Aya Otonashi.

Aya Otonashi is dragging herself up the cliff. Though gravely wounded and about to die, she smiles.

She still holds that smile more charming than anyone else's.

"I'm sure you don't actually have to ask, Maria. This is my revenge on the family that created the void inside me."

"That's not what you told me. Weren't you going to fill the void by bringing joy to everyone in the world?"

“That was a major goal of mine, too. It wasn’t the only one, though. Killing the family that made me hollow was another important objective in my revenge. I decided to entrust my other mission, the mission of making everyone happy, to you.”

“I can’t do that.”

“You can. I say this because, from the moment I die, you are no longer Maria Otonashi.”

She smiles.

“You are Aya Otonashi.”

Yes, my sister *did* predict it.

“I’m going to make a prediction about your future.”

“You’re going to become me—no, you have to.”

“That means you’ll have to become someone who makes others happy.”

“I’m going to set out on a journey when I’m fourteen.”

“Maria Otonashi will become Aya Otonashi.”

Everything turned out as Aya Otonashi intended. We were all dancing in the palm of her hand. Aya Otonashi had the ability to manipulate people and control the future—she was a monster. That’s why she could do this, too.

“I may lose my body, but I will not die. Maria, I will live on by taking possession of you. I’m sure you understand. Once you are under my control, you will cease to exist anywhere. You will exist for the sole purpose of seeing my wish come to fruition. Abandon this wish, and you will become a husk with no soul or identity.”

Yes, that’s right.

I’m not Maria Otonashi. I’m Aya Otonashi.

Kazuki really allowed me to dream. Unfortunately, going back to being Maria Otonashi is out of the cards for me.

I will destroy the Misbegotten Happiness. I will get Kazuki out of this Box. My resolve hasn’t changed.

But now that we've come this far, my being with Kazuki—

(Maria, *that isn't Aya Otonashi.*)

My eyes widen at that voice.

The vestige of Kazuki is here.

(You can't interpret Aya Otonashi to suit your needs. You have to stop running away.) "...Running away? I can't accept that, even from you. Aya Otonashi has me up against a wall, and that's a fact. And you're saying I'm interpreting her to suit my needs? That's not possible. It's not like I wanted to have such painful thoughts. I didn't want to keep fighting...!"

(Stop acting like Aya Otonashi was a monster.)

We're talking past each other, but I guess that's to be expected. He can't hear me, after all.

"Aya Otonashi was special. Ever since I met her, she was special, and there was never a moment she wasn't. So 'monster' isn't a completely inaccurate term, wouldn't you say?"

I laugh self-deprecatingly.

"Aya Otonashi actually predicted all of this. She said she would take over my body, then killed herself on her birthday, and everything happened as she'd said. Aya Otonashi's visions of the future were never once incorrect. Aya Otonashi was an exceptional being—human, and more than human."

The "pool" is quiet for a time.

In the meantime, Aya Otonashi's severed top half has taken hold of the middle school me. The bloodied girl seizes her little sister and never lets go.

The "pool" speaks up again.

(I went to the home where you used to live and did some investigating. I learned everything I could about the Otonashi household. I figured out right away that the family had some complicated circumstances, but I couldn't find much about you yourself. Because no one knew you.) "Because I was a quiet child with no friends."

(Everyone remembered Aya Otonashi, though. They all agreed she was an extremely beautiful and intelligent girl. The thing is, even though there were no apparent issues with Aya herself, I also heard she was a troublemaker. All kinds of incidents occurred around her. What's more, the scale of these incidents increased the older she got.) "That's definitely how she was, but what does it matter? What're you trying to say?"

I'm irritated. I don't know why.

(She was fond of talking about how she wanted to make everyone in the world happy. Her homeroom teacher during her second year of middle school knew this, too. It wasn't for show or just a whim; for her, that impossibly ambitious idea was a sincere aspiration. That's why her teacher wholeheartedly supported her plan, even though she was a little young.) *What plan?*

The "pool" tells me.

(She wanted to study abroad in New York when she turned fourteen.)

"Wh-what...?"

(Aya wanted to broaden her horizons for the sake of her mission to fill everyone in the world with joy. Apparently, she said she wanted to travel to many different countries besides America in the future, too. She didn't have any plans to return home. According to the teacher, she had persuaded her parents, but the only one she couldn't speak of her plan to was her beloved sister.) *"Maria, I'm going to set out on a journey when I'm fourteen."*

"B-but... But that doesn't make sense! Aya Otonashi killed herself along with her family on her birthday! She decided that was how she would get revenge on our parents and take control of me. She didn't want to go abroad... That—"

That was too mundane for her. She'd never consider it.

Or is that just what I want to think...? ...Yes, maybe I do want Aya Otonashi to be a monster.

Why? ...I don't know. I don't know why I'm so upset, either.

(Aya Otonashi was constantly, earnestly trying to save everyone on the planet. She was a bright girl who spent her time exploring and implementing

ways of doing that. But at the end of the day, she was a student in middle school. Meaning her school was her only sphere of influence. Her sense of ethics was still immature, too. She was aware of these flaws, though, and she tried to break out into the world to rid herself of them.) The “pool” continues as I become more and more bewildered.

(Do you think such an optimistic, forward-thinking girl would really kill her family for revenge, let alone choose to die herself? Do you think she would entertain an ill-considered and unfair idea like handing her soul over to you?) “But that’s what she did! It was possible for Aya Otonashi!”

After all, she was a monster beyond the comprehension or imagination of an unremarkable person like me.

“She predicted it. I remember what she said: *‘You’re going to become me—no, you have to.’* And that’s how it turned out. Like my older sister, I have lived for the sake of a wish at the cost of myself. That’s what actually happened, so what you’re saying can’t be true!”

(Aya Otonashi was apparently quite concerned about her younger sister, Maria Otonashi. She knew the love from their parents was tepid at best, but she coped with it well. On the other hand, her little sister made no attempt to acknowledge how things were. She just ran away and never made any forward progress. Maria was apathetic, didn’t trust adults, couldn’t make friends, and had no goals. And Aya couldn’t leave her like that. She was a big sister; she didn’t want Maria to lead such an empty life. She wanted her little sister to change. Wanted her to live with passion. Yes, *like her.*) “*Maria Otonashi will become Aya Otonashi.*”

“Oh...”

(So Aya showed Maria how she lived her own life, good and bad. Her wish was for the two of them to lead more meaningful lives and put the adults to shame. That was how Aya Otonashi thought of her sister.) “*So let’s get started. We don’t hate anyone, but there is an indescribable urge driving us forward. We have an enemy—you might call it emptiness. Well, let’s show them.*

“*Let’s show them the nature of our revenge.*”

“...Stop.”

The “pool” is doing something terrible to me. It has shoved its hand into me and is stirring it around.

“Stop. That’s just how you imagine it. You just want Aya Otonashi to be a normal girl; don’t pretend she was!”

(I’m sure even after I’ve told you this, you’ll deny all the evidence and still assert that Aya Otonashi was something special or supernatural. But I think you can remember the truth. The simple, human Aya Otonashi, the one who was nothing like a monster, should be there in your memories. After all, no matter how grown-up she seemed, she was simply a middle school student.) “That’s not true! *Aya* was always special, and—”

“Nh...nnnh...nnnnh.”

The scene before me changes. It looks exactly as it did in my daydream, so I’m not confused. But the location shifts from the scene of the accident to somewhere else, and I can’t hide that I’m a little shaken.

This is that house I once lived in. My sister Aya’s warm room. It smells like that mix of perfume and essential oils.

Aya and I are in the room. I guess we’re both probably around ten? Little Aya is lying facedown on the bed while the little me looks on worriedly.

“What’s wrong, Aya?”

Concerned, I jostle Aya when she doesn’t lift her face. She is staying stock-still, refusing to show me her expression.

After a while, she finally speaks. “...I lost.”

“Huh?”

“The national test. They had it at your school, too, right? My classmate beat me. I’ve never lost before.”

“What? Is that it? It happens sometimes. It’s nothing worth getting this depressed about, is it?”

“You don’t understand,” she says in a low voice, clearly angry.

Little Maria falls silent.

“You don’t understand what it means at all, Maria. What it means for me to lose, at a test or at anything else! I can’t let anyone else beat me. I have to be worth more than anyone else. I have to make everyone need me. If I don’t...”

“—If only you had never been born.”

“...I can never get revenge on Rinko!” she shouts with her face pressed hard into the pillow. “I can’t stand tall and say she was wrong...!”

“Aya...,” I whisper, watching our two younger selves.

I had no idea what was going on back then. I didn’t know what was bothering my sister. I do now, though.

Aya Otonashi had been fighting all along.

She had been fighting the truth that she wasn’t wanted.

In the end, society had seen Aya Otonashi as an “unfortunate child”—and that was what she was. It shouldn’t have come as a surprise. Aya couldn’t escape from the fact that Rinko and my parents didn’t think she was necessary. That was why she tried to demonstrate her worth by becoming an extraordinary person. She overextended herself to a reckless degree. She fought on, wearing herself thin, holding back the tears all the while. The esteem of others was what made my sister feel alive.

She put in more effort than anyone. She kept running ahead, not letting me or anyone else see how hard she was working. I still think my sister was an incredible person for making herself strong.

And yet, at the same time, behind her dignity and pride, there was insecurity and frailty.

(Aya Otonashi was human.)

“No...”

I shake my head in denial. I know I’m acting like a petulant child, but there’s no way I can accept it.

“My sister, Aya, was special. She was supernatural. She wanted to die. That’s how it has to be; if it isn’t, then she was just a victim in a tragic accident. She was killed for no reason by a lunatic. I don’t want that. I don’t want her death to

have been meaningless. My sister took over my body, and she could do it because she was supernatural. Can't that be the way it is? After all, if it isn't—"—then Aya will really die."

Abruptly, the scene before me returns from my sister's room to the site of the accident, but it looks slightly different from before.

Instead of crawling up the cliff, Aya is trapped inside the car at the bottom. The door was mangled by the impact and won't open, so she's desperately beating at the windshield. But the blows of a dying girl are weak, and each hit thunks quietly against the glass.

"I don't want to die... Help... No," she weeps in a feeble voice. "It hurts. It hurts. I don't want to die. I don't want to die. Maria. I don't...want to die yet...!"

It goes without saying that she's nowhere close to smiling.

The middle schooler me looks down from the precipice with a bouquet of flowers in her hand. She cries, incapable of noticing Aya fervently calling for help.

I didn't visit her until the day after the accident, after all.

Little Maria tosses the bouquet from the cliff and speaks quietly with empty eyes.

"I don't accept it—I don't accept that Aya died."

"Aya is a monster, so she can't die." "I won't let her." "My sister took control of me." "I don't want to be alone." "If I become Aya, then I'm not." "I'm not alone."

I recall the conversations among my relatives, the people who talked of me as nothing but a nuisance.

—If my sister Aya is gone, then...

There's no one left to need me.

And that was the one thing I couldn't take. I wanted someone to need me, even if it was just my sister's ghost. I decided she had entrusted me with her will. I decided she had taken possession of me. *Aya needed my body.* That was why I had to live with the goal of bringing happiness to everyone in the world. *If*

I failed, it would be as if Aya didn't need me.

I am not alone.

My sister, Aya, lives within me.

However, the “pool”—Kazuki—confronts me.

“The true wish of Maria Otonashi—and Aya Otonashi—was not to make everyone in the world happy.”

He's right.

Our true wish—

All we wished for, as two lonely girls unloved by our parents, was—

“To be needed.”

“To be needed.”

I can't stop crying. What should I do? I have to kill my sister. But if I do, I'll be all alone. No one will need me. I can't bear that. If I let go of this Box, I'll fall into despair and become a shell of myself. Help me. Help me. Someone please help me—but of course they won't. No one could ever be there for me. That would be too easy— “—Oh my god... There is someone. There is someone for me.”

Yes—that's right.

I have a savior.

I have a savior—so maybe it is that easy.

“I need you, Maria.”

—Kazuki Hoshino.

Kazuki says what I want to hear more than anything else.

And it's the truth. If I don't go to him, Kazuki will continue pounding on the wall. He can't escape from that cycle.

I am the only one who can save Kazuki.

And Kazuki is the only one who can save me.

Kazuki needs me more than anything.

I need Kazuki more than anything.

I wipe away my tears.

How much of a detour has this been?

I should have just been honest and said I wanted to stay with Kazuki.

It would be enough—

Truly, that alone would be enough—

“To make my wish come true.”

That’s why it’s okay to break the Misbegotten Happiness now.

After all, true happiness is within reach.

I must crush my false wish to make my real one come true.

I made my sister into a monster, and now I must kill her with my own hands.

I approach Aya where she is trapped inside the car. She still banging against the windshield, trying her hardest to survive. But there’s no saving her. No matter how much she wants to live, despite all her dreams for a brighter future, despite all her abilities to make it real, she will not be saved. My sister died tragically and unnecessarily.

“Aya.”

My voice doesn’t reach my sister. I can’t interfere with the past.

All the same, Aya stops beating on the windshield. She closes her eyes and lies down on the seat.

She is prepared for her fate.

“I’m sorry I left you trapped here. I’m sorry for twisting your feelings all this time. I made it your fault and avoided facing reality. But that’s all over now. I’m going to set you free.”

I remove a small bottle from my pocket.

“This is your birthday present.”

I drip out the scented oil I had intended to give her that day. The smell of peppermint spreads.

With that, the time that stopped for me on that day finally begins to move again.

Aya probably can't smell the peppermint, but her cheeks relax slightly.

I know my sister wasn't happy with the life she lived. I'm sure she had nothing but regret. I'm sure she died filled with anger and suffering.

But—

This is just my guess, but I believe one thought did cross her mind.

She hid that she was going to study abroad from me and made sure I was home when she set off on her journey. Because of that— *—at least her little sister survived.*

“Maria, please...find happiness...”

My sister's eyes would never open again.

“Good-bye, O. Good-bye...Aya.”

The O I've been chasing all this time quietly melts away into the air.

The monster within me is gone.

I dive into the bottom of the ocean once again. I follow the crying voice deeper and deeper into the darkness. Though I can't see anything in front of me, I'm not frightened anymore. My memories grow clearer the farther I dive.

Damn...this is a past I would rather avoid. But I won't run away. I plunge ahead so I can confront the pain of what happened before.

How long has the girl down here been crying? Since the very beginning, I'm sure. I've been crying out with loneliness ever since I initially obtained a Box. That crybaby, my true self, was in the way when I was trying to become Aya Otonashi, so I sank her to the bottom of the ocean.

But I can't break the Misbegotten Happiness if I don't call her back.

I wriggle through the darkness in search of the sobbing girl. I can tell the crying is coming from very close by, yet I can't see her. I call my name —“Maria!”—and spread my arms.

I feel someone with my fingertips.

“Are you Maria?”

I grab what feels like a wrist and pull her near.

The darkness immediately rolls away from around us as if we had entered a bubble of light. The weeping girl looks like I did back in middle school.

“Are you the zeroth Maria?”

This is the past self I once abandoned. The one who cries out of loneliness. The one who is weak and unreliable. The one who believes no one loves her.

(Can you see me now?)

Her words catch me off guard.

But I understand... I’ve been blind to her this entire time. “Yeah, I can see you.”

(Are you going to stay with me?)

“I’ll always be with you.”

I take the zeroth Maria’s hand.

“I won’t run from you anymore. I won’t flee from the past.” I gaze deep into her eyes and smile gently. “So come back.”

The zeroth Maria seems hesitant. It’s understandable, since I’m the one who mistreated her.

(...I want you to promise me something.)

“I’m listening.”

(Cry when you’re sad. Be joyful when you’re happy. Be angry when you’re upset. Laugh when you’re having fun. And when you’re in trouble, don’t wear yourself down; reach out for help. Take care of yourself before others. Don’t hate anyone. Live with pride in yourself.) I had never been able to do a single one of those things.

Oddly enough, though, I’m confident I can honor them all with the next promise: If I love someone, I should see it through.

“Yeah, don’t worry. I’ll honor them.”

(Really?)

I nod. I don't have a single doubt that I can keep my word.

(Then I'll come back!)

The zeroth Maria stops crying. She smiles, and then she slips into me. "Unh, ah....."

Even now that I know the whole truth, it doesn't feel good. It's as if my blood is flowing in reverse. I'm not strong anymore; I can't even pretend to be. My fragile self has returned within me, the girl with nothing to make her special.

The entirety of the past enters me. Reality washes over me, along with its grief. I've finally stopped running from it, but I hate the world. There's no kindness in a world that's so persistently made me suffer time and time again.

It's harsh, thankless, mean, capricious, irrational, and frightening—

But...

...still...

...I am not alone anymore.

"Isn't that right, Kazuki?"

That's why I can once again be Maria Otonashi.



I wake up, free from the ocean depths.

I'm in a room of the apartment where I used to live.

O is gone. Instead, a clear, beautiful, yet delicate square Box rests in my hands.

Also, I am not the only one here.

"Oh—"

Seeing him makes me start to cry again. The tears are pouring uncontrollably; I can't stop. Pathetic as it may be, this is who I once was, and who I've always been.

"Oh—Kazuki."

I embrace Kazuki where he sits on the floor of the room. Kazuki doesn't react, though. He simply stares at a single point with vacant eyes.

Kazuki has lost everything to the violence of those loops. The utter solitude stole away his intelligence and memories, transforming him into a silent body. The shape of Kazuki's soul was changed by the cruelty of this Box; he will probably never return to normal.

As usual, reality is nothing but cruelty, and all it offers me are trials to overcome.

But I will not rely on Boxes any longer.

Weeping, I try my best to smile, and then I speak to Kazuki.

"Hey...do you remember what we said before? When I lost hope in the Rejecting Classroom, you got down on one knee and said '*Your escort has arrived, Princess Maria*' and offered me your hand. You told me you had betrayed everything, made enemies of everyone, to come rescue me. Your actions have been consistent ever since that moment. You have always brought me salvation. I thought I had become strong, but really, I was imprisoned at the bottom of the sea. And you dove down into the depths to save me. You did exactly what you said you would; you found me there even when it meant betraying and making enemies of everyone. You didn't care that it would hurt you so much and leave you like this."

I set the transparent Box on the floor and squeeze Kazuki's hand gently. His fingers move slightly, but it's probably just a reflexive reaction to being grabbed.

"I want you to forgive me. There's only one thing I can do for you when you've done so much for me." I touch Kazuki's chest. "I will stay by your side for life."

Kazuki doesn't react.

"I won't give up. I'll wait however long it takes for you to come back. It'll be so much easier than when you were waiting for me, right? ...No, I guess not. It's not a question of waiting or not. It's our fate to be inseparable. I will always be with you. It's the only thing I can do."

I smile at him.

“That is our normal life that no one can ever destroy.”

But my tears fall into the palm of Kazuki’s hand. He won’t even look at me; he really is merely staring into space.

“That should solve everything, right? You’re the one who said there’s no despair that can’t be undone by just living our day-to-day lives. Isn’t that right?”

No matter how hard I try to hold it back, my voice is trembling.

“I have faith in what you said. I have faith in the one who defeated Aya Otonashi.”

Kazuki will come back.

But I also honestly feel that losing hope isn’t out of the question for me.

“Do you know who I am?”

“Do you understand what I’m saying?”

“Can you see me?”

“Can you tell I’m touching you?”

“Do you remember who you are?”

He doesn’t respond to anything.

It’s definitely starting to look bleak. But I still smile. I *will* find hope.

“It’s okay. If you’ve forgotten, then I’ll keep calling your name. I’ll keep saying your name, just like how you called mine until you found me.”

I say it.

“Kazuki.”

I say it tearfully.

“Kazuki.”

I say it with love.

“Kazuki.”

I say it with cheer.

“Kazuki.

“Kazuki.

“Kazuki.”

Over and over, I say Kazuki’s name.

Before I know it, the sun has set. Kazuki didn’t spend the whole time sitting; he stood up and walked around some, and he even touched my face and body. He didn’t say anything, though, and I don’t see anything resembling thought. Strangely enough, however, he never hit the wall.

“Kazuki.”

I must have said that name thousands of times today. But that never bothered me in the slightest. Saying Kazuki’s name makes me happy.

Kazuki crouches down abruptly, as if he’s just noticed the transparent Box. He picks it up and seems to be gazing at it. He’s completely still.

“...Kazuki, what’s wrong?”

Kazuki squeezes the Misbegotten Happiness in his scarred right hand. It still has the power of the Empty Box to destroy Boxes.

That’s why the clear and fragile Box shatters easily.

The Misbegotten Happiness is utterly annihilated.

With that, Kazuki finally loses the power of the Empty Box.

It’s all over. Boxes will probably never play a part in our world again. Kazuki stayed true to himself until the end and eradicated his enemy.

Kazuki is victorious over the Boxes.

He turns his gaze toward me. There is no light in his eyes. He doesn’t see me. He still has no will. I’m sure he doesn’t know who he is.

Still, he doesn’t look away from me. Why is that?

I know what Kazuki is going to say. I know he is about to perform a miracle.

“—Maria.”

That familiar name probably just forced its way out of his mouth. That has to

be it.

I can't get my hopes up.

I can't let myself rejoice too much.

I tell myself this in my mind, but it's no use. I am so overjoyed that I start sobbing again.

I can't help it, though, can I?

After all, I'm not the strong Aya Otonashi anymore—I'm just a crybaby. I am Maria Otonashi.



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—Do you have a wish?

✦✦✦ **Kasumi Mogi (19), April 10** ✦✦✦

My first love probably ended when she appeared.

I'm determined not to give up, but..... Ugh, fine, I get it! There's something unshakable between her and Hoshino that I could never build between us. I know it's love. I can tell that much.

It's a bright and sunny day, and the pink cherry blossoms are out and proud in full bloom. I'm practicing my draws again today at the archery range in the rehabilitation center's large recreation facility.

My arms have gained a lot of muscle since the accident, but I'm still not strong enough and have trouble merely drawing back the bow. Just shooting the arrow is all I can manage; aiming is a whole other problem. Unsurprisingly, it misses the target.

I let out a small sigh. I've always been a poor athlete, but I honestly don't think I have much of a knack for archery. Appearing in the Paralympics is probably out of the cards for me, too... But if I say that to my physical therapist, Ryoko, I'm sure she'll get upset. I'm sick of hearing stories about how gold-medal-winner Takanashi was much worse than me at first, or how Goto the wheelchair tennis winner recovered from an attempted suicide. "Put your whole heart into it!" Ryoko says. "Nothing is impossible in the face of a true dream! Don't give up—heat up!" Ugh, seriously, she is too intense. And strict. I wish she would cut me a little slack, since I can't walk.

I don't ever really get any special treatment in this huge hospital, but that makes sense. This place is full of wheelchair-using patients just like me. In fact, sometimes Ryoko seems less sympathetic toward me and genuinely jealous of my youth. She's kinda weird, in my opinion.

"Kasumi!"

I lift my head as someone calls my name.

Ishizaki has noticed me and is waving his hand happily from the tennis court. I grimace slightly and return the wave. I've been trying to keep myself from getting that look on my face, but it never goes well. I mean, what's the best way to respond to someone who told me they have feelings for me?

I draw the bow again, wanting to clear away all those complicated thoughts.

I used to think there wouldn't be many guys who would be willing to accept me as I am. Anyone would probably feel that way in my shoes. And yet, at least around here, I'm...well, popular, although it feels strange to say it myself. I can understand why people with disabilities like mine would chat me up, but even abled people have tried flirting with me, too. I get hit on much more often than I did when I was a student.

At first, I kept wondering why someone would go for a girl with so many issues, at least physically, but lately, I think I'm starting to understand a bit. A lot of people out there like the feeling of supporting someone. Marrying me and providing for me would at least create meaning and satisfaction in life. They come after me because they can be assured of that.

And maybe I could find some happiness in that fairy-tale life with someone caring for me and tending to my every need. But I guess I'm still not sure how I should react to the affection of people like that. Don't they just like me as someone disabled and not for who I am? Aren't they simply putting me up on a pedestal and acting as if my disability gives me a special kind of beauty that abled people don't have? Aren't they merely looking to be with a partner who is weak and has no choice but to follow their lead? Maybe those thoughts make me a bad person; I don't know.

Still, I can't help but think, *At least Hoshino treated me the same before and after I became a paraplegic.*

This time, the arrow doesn't even come close to hitting the target.

There was a major incident between us, something way more massive than my accident.

The thing is, I'm not even sure exactly what happened. It was an inexplicable, impossible incident.

I remember bits and pieces—I once caused trouble for Hoshino in some other world, and he definitively rejected me. Then there was the mess with Miyazaki. And the mysterious death of that first-year student Koudai Kamiuchi. The scare with the dog-people that Oomine apparently started. And—Hoshino losing his mind.

The key part is missing, though. These incidents seem as if they should be connected, but they don't link up. It's as though my memories of them have been cut apart into separate films. Or as if some god made sure to hide everything important.

Something else feels off, too, with Nana Yanagi and Toji Kijima. They were old friends of Hoshino's whom I got to know in high school. There shouldn't be anything especially unusual about this, but they fit in so naturally that it actually feels extremely wrong. I recall how I befriended them. I remember Nana kept making eyes at Hoshino, even though she had a boyfriend, and it drove me up the wall. But some part of these memories doesn't seem real, or maybe it seems out of place. As if someone just slapped the memories in to make things seem plausible.

I think—I think I've forgotten something important. Something vital.

I may not know what it is, but one thing is certain.

I wanted to go back to school, but...

...Hoshino was not there.

My doctors had always recommended that I go to a big rehabilitation center with proper facilities. My desire to return to school with Hoshino was the reason why I held out against the idea for so long and stayed at my initial hospital. But Hoshino wasn't at school anymore, so I inevitably lost my motivation to stay, and I left the town I knew.

Before I did, though, there was one thing I had to settle once and for all.

The day after I decided to transfer to the rehab center, I called Otonashi to the hospital. I asked the nurses to do me a favor and make sure we had the roof to ourselves. I could imagine myself getting worked up, so I didn't want to talk in my room.

The cold autumn wind chilled me to the bone. When Maria Otonashi stood with the beautiful scarlet foliage of the distant mountains behind her, she looked as if she'd stepped out of a painting. No, Otonashi could be a painting even without the fall leaves.

Her long hair had once fallen to her hips, but she had cut it shoulder-length. The new style made her the slightest bit more approachable; some of the mystique was gone. Or maybe it was more than just the haircut.

I thought something as I looked at this beautiful girl again:

I don't think I'll ever like Otonashi.

There are a few things I'm convinced of. I know I could have started a relationship with Hoshino if she hadn't come along. It's her fault Hoshino ended up the way he is. If I could have gone back to my normal life, Otonashi would not have come back to school. Hoshino would have remained the same as before.

I have no doubt we would have gotten close enough for me to call him by his first name. To me, he would have been "Kazuki."

It was all because of her.

It was all Maria Otonashi's fault that my normal life came apart.

"I'm going to go away and stay at a big rehabilitation center."

Thanks to her, I had no choice but to leave Hoshino behind.

When I told her, Otonashi's expression didn't change. She just said, "I see," and after a moment, she added, "I'll tell Kazuki, too."

My emotions surged when she said his name. *Do you have any idea how I feel about having to tell you this at all? Do you know how much determination it took?* I wanted to throw the regret, the rage, and all the other negative emotions within me in her face. I wanted to curse at her, and I'd never cursed before. I wanted to make her pay for breaking Hoshino and everyone else. I wanted to make her apologize, and I wanted to slap her as hard as I could.

I clenched my fists to hold in my anger.

Those fists were very, very tight.

Then I told her what I had decided to say.

“Please take care of Hoshino.”

I bit my lip and bowed deeply.

Ugh, I hated it. I hated it so much.

But even though I despised my rival, this was how I had decided to deal with her.

“I want to support Hoshino. I want to stay by his side and care for him... But I understand. I still need the help of many others to finally get back to normal. I can’t do anything on my own. As helpless as I am...I would only be a burden...!”

I couldn’t lift my head. I was frustrated and sad and refusing to admit the truth. I was crying.

“Even after the accident—I was confident I could get Hoshino to notice me.”

“Yeah.”

That was a lie. I knew there was no way I could work my way between them. I wouldn’t have had a chance even if I were abled. Otonashi knew it, too, but she just listened to my blustering.

“I love Hoshino. I don’t even care that he can’t speak. I might love him forever.”

“Right.”

“I’ll never love anyone like this again. It’s something that’s important to me.”

“...Yeah.”

“Hoshino would care for me, too... That’s right—I haven’t lost to you! ...I haven’t. I haven’t, not at all!”

I bit my lip again.

“...But, but...!!”

When it comes to what Hoshino needs—

“I’m not the one!”

—it’s her. It’s not Kasumi Mogi.

It's Maria Otonashi.

“Aaaa;

Though I tried to fight it down, I ended up screaming.

Otonashi didn't do anything for me. She didn't give me a hug or wipe away my tears. She just stood there watching until my crying quieted down.

“Mogi.” Once my tears subsided, Otonashi spoke to me in a firm tone. “Kazuki will make it back to his normal life.”

I looked at her. My eyes were red.

“You care for Kazuki, and I know that will have a good effect on him. Your feelings will play a part in bringing him back. It's inevitable. So I'm going to go ahead and say this now.”

Maria Otonashi bowed her head low.

“Thank you for caring for Kazuki.”

I don't know how to put it, exactly, but what she did calmed my emotions. I even found myself smiling. “I just can't win.”

I really couldn't.

I mean, Otonashi was certain Kazuki would come back to some sense of normalcy, even after seeing him in that state. I had said I would love him even if he never recovered, and I meant it. And therein was the problem.

After all, it meant that some part of me believed he wouldn't make a comeback.

Maria Otonashi had no doubts, though. She held on to her faith in his return.

That was why she was the one who deserved to be by his side.

I could tell that my chest had gotten lighter all of a sudden. There was an indescribable sense of relief that left me both surprised and disappointed. Somewhere along the way, the love that had once been my salvation had become a heavy burden. Carrying it was starting to exhaust me.

“Yeah...”

My love was at an end.

Will I be able to have feelings for someone again?

Could I become someone's emotional support?

Will I find a place where I belong?

During my reverie, several cherry blossom petals drift down onto my head.

I turn around in surprise.

"Hey there, Idol!"

That nickname again. My arms go slack, and I lower the bow.

It's my physical therapist. Her face is tanned and makeup-free, but she's wearing a clashing shade of white.

"...Please stop calling me that, Ryoko."

She grins happily when she sees I'm annoyed.

"Come on, that's what you are."

"Why is that...?"

"The media's here to report on you again. And that's not all. It's those super-famous twenty-four-hour TV guys. You're happy to do it, of course?" And she's loud as ever, too.

"...No way. Please turn them down."

"Again? ...Okay, can I shoot straight with you, here?"

"...Sure."

"You *need* to be on TV!" She jabs her finger at me. "You'll capture the hearts of millions—I guarantee it! You've got the perfect charismatic smile for it. You don't inspire the pity most people feel for disabled people. Do you know how rare that is? You could single-handedly change the image of people with handicaps. The more exposure you get, the more supporters you'll make, no doubt about it! The media knows this, too, and that's why they're all after you. You should be an idol—sing and dance and do meet-and-greets and get all the votes! Once you do, the revolution is on! It'd be a huge help for the patients

and physical therapists to have more supporters, too. You're the only one who can do it. It's your mission!"

"...I'm sick of hearing about this."

"Hmm? What was that?"

"You've said this over and over. You said you're 'shooting straight,' but you're just repeating yourself!"

However, Ryoko sincerely believes in my potential.

".....So—"

Thank you.

But I'm too embarrassed to say it out loud.

I think Ryoko is blowing things out of proportion, and it won't go as well as she thinks.

Still, I have a chance to make a difference in society, even after everything. That alone both surprises me and gives me hope. My life doesn't have to be defined by getting help from others.

Though I can't deny that some options are unavailable to me now, there may be things that only I can do. Maybe something less dramatic than becoming an idol—a quieter and more modest path.

"...I'll think about it when things are easier for me."

For the time being, though, I'm too busy working on myself.

"Hmph, it sounds like you're coming around to the idea a bit. I guess I'll hold off on answering the TV station."

"Uh... No, I'm saying I still can't..." This is Ryoko I'm dealing with here. If I don't make a firm refusal, she'll twist my arm, and next thing I know, my appearance will be confirmed. "I mean it when I say it'd be a real problem for me!"

"Oh? How so?"

"Um, well...more people might start hitting on me after seeing me on TV..."

Uh-oh. I shouldn't have said that.

I glance at Ryoko, and her temples are twitching. "I can't believe you think that's a real problem. Heads up, once you're out of your teens, you won't have nearly as many options! Japanese men are all into young girls!"

"Um...I'm sure you're just right for somebody out there."

"If you were trying to console me, you didn't. That was so condescending."

Yeah, well... Maybe not someone of the opposite gender...

"I can tell by your eyes that you're thinking something rude. You've got some nerve. Fine, fine, I get it! Today's therapy is going to be especially intense!"

"Please don't! That's unprofessional of you, Ryoko!"

"Idols don't whine."

"They do! They complain and bad-mouth their fans like crazy on their secret Twitter accounts!"

"That sounds awfully specific... And I noticed you didn't deny you're an idol that time."

"I am not!"

Anyway.

Hoshino. That's how things are for me now. I'm doing all right.

I imagine Otonashi is by your side even now. I wasn't there to see it, but I heard she said something unbelievable during her inaugural address as student council president.

I'm kind of looking forward to when she makes good on her promise, but for the most part, I'm jealous.

There's about a year and a half until it happens, according to her.

I hope to grow up a bit before then. I want to get stronger so I can be independent and support someone else. I want you to see me like that.

Right now, that's my quiet little wish.

✦✦✦ Yuri Yanagi (19), July 6 ✦✦✦

I want to have a hobby.

When I passed the entrance exam and successfully enrolled at Tokyo University, that was the first thought I had. I went to check out the clubs after I decided to join one, and the one that caught my interest was photography. They had some beautiful photos on display in their room, of children laughing against a blue sky. I was sure there were plenty of other beautiful things out there in the world, and I wanted to be able to find them. I wanted to preserve that beauty forever. That's what I was thinking.

I asked my parents to buy me a slightly high-end single-lens reflex camera as my gift to celebrate getting accepted, and then I joined the photography club. I was surprised to find the members were basically all men, but everyone has been very kind. When I explain the kind of pictures I want to take, they're very careful and thorough in teaching me how. They also loan me the expensive lenses I need. Everyone really wants to work in the darkroom with me for whatever reason—even though I own a digital camera—but in any case, I have everything I could ever want as a newcomer.

Since I started university, a slightly embarrassing fact has also come to my attention. I like frilly, girlish clothes, but I can't shake the feeling that college girls don't normally wear those things. But if I just dress the same as everyone else, I can't show off my personality, and bleaching and perming my hair doesn't work for me, either. I want to keep the same long black hair and straight bangs I've always had. I'll always prefer skirts, I love ribbons, and lately, I've been getting into knee socks.

That's why I have a nickname now.

"Otaku Club Princess."

"I want to cry."

I break down in tears at a Starbucks near the university.

".....Now, now, being the Otaku Club Princess isn't so bad. At least you're a princess."

My best friend and fellow student at Tokyo University, Iroha Shindo, crunches on the ice in her coffee as she provides an unhelpful attempt at encouragement.

Her pupils are a bit dull; she doesn't have the eyes of a snake with prey in its sights anymore. A certain someone wounded her deeply, and she has yet to heal from it. Even now, a year later, she's still going to a clinic specializing in psychosomatic problems. Iroha herself describes it as "taking a break from life." I get the feeling that someone who was running for as long as she was would've probably needed a break either way.

I'm not that worried, though. Even during this rest, she's still a force to be reckoned with. The Tokyo University Science III test is said to be the most difficult of all, and she passed it right out of high school and entered medical school. Other students taking their exams can't even compare.

"By the way, Yuri, I noticed you had a gaggle of guys around you when we met up, huh?"

"That's everyone from the club. They escorted me, since they said it would be dangerous for me on my own."

"At night is one thing, but it's the middle of the afternoon... It shouldn't be any surprise that people are calling you a princess, in that case."

It isn't as if I asked them to escort me, though... I've already learned that turning them down just makes things weird, too...

"That's not it. Being called Otaku Club Princess isn't what makes me want to cry. Sure, I didn't like it at first, but now I'm used to it."

"So what you're saying is you've got something else bothering you?"

"Yeah. The truth is, one of the older guys in the club asked me to go out with him. He's popular with other girls, but I'd never really paid much attention to him..."

"Oh dear. And you turned him down, of course. Well, I guess it does hurt to turn someone down when they like you, no matter who it is. Is that why you want to cry?"

“No, I accepted.”

“You accepted?!” Iroha slams the table with a *bang* and rises to her feet. Of course, this attracts the attention of the other customers. *Aren’t you overreacting a bit? It’s embarrassing.*

“Um, just hear me out. It’s that I...want to forget about...*him* if I can... I thought maybe I would be able to if I started seeing someone else, so...”

“...Yeah.”

Iroha has a sour look on her face. She’s still not happy with Kazuki after he broke her down, even if he did put her back on the right path. She’s unsure of how to process her feelings.

“But I couldn’t forget about him even after I started seeing someone else, and I never did develop feelings for my clubmate. As a result, we ended up breaking up after two weeks... I’m sorry...”

“Hmm, not that I don’t understand your side, but the other guy must. I’m sure you’re feeling guilty about treating him so badly, huh? Yeah, that’s definitely a reason to cry.”

“Oh, that’s not it.”

“That’s not it?!”

Bang—!

Iroha slams the table and rises to her feet again. This is mortifying... Now the staff are watching, too.

“That wasn’t the end of it. The fact is, one of the few girls in the club had feelings for him... She started avoiding me. It makes sense; she wouldn’t want to be around me after I started a relationship with someone she liked and then broke up with him so quickly.”

“Hmm, I suppose not.”

“She’s one of the only other girls, though, so I wanted to offer an olive branch.”

“By doing what?”

“I thought maybe she’d cool down a little if she got a boyfriend. I knew there was another guy she kinda liked, too. My idea was that everything would turn out fine if I could hook her up with him. So I decided to act as a go-between.”

“Hmph... Not really the way I’d go about it, but I suppose it could work for you.”

“Yeah. So I’d get them alone together, encourage them to ask each other out, things like that. The girl figured out what I was trying to do and started to warm up to me just a little, but...”

“There was a problem?”

“Yeah. Um, the guy got mad at me. He started yelling, like, ‘Why are you trying to force us to go out?’ and ‘Stop playing with me!’ It was scary...”

“Why would he be upset?”

“So, he had a crush on *me*...”

“That sucks! ...Well, I guess you couldn’t really help it, since you didn’t know.”

“No, I knew.”

“You knew?!”

Bang—!

She hits the table again. Even the customers outside on the terrace are looking at us now...

“No, it’s just... I’m sorry. But you see, from my perspective, I’d just finished that whole mess with my other clubmate, so I’d never go out with this guy. It never even crossed my mind that this could happen... Still, none of that had anything to do with him... I’m so awful...”

“Hmm. Well, at least you never considered dating him. That’s something in your defense. But...this is still definitely your fault.”

“That’s true... I understand that. The thing is, all of this prompted him to start pursuing a relationship with me. I tried to fix things and tell him I can’t see anyone right now, but...he’s the type who flips out if he doesn’t get his way... The more I tried to explain why I couldn’t be with him, the more upset he got.

Then one day, he finally—”

“Y-yeah...?”

“—assaulted me.”

Iroha’s eyes widen at my admission.

“By ‘assaulted,’ do you mean...what I think you mean?”

“Yeah... Oh, but I’m okay! I screamed, and there were people nearby, so I wasn’t hurt! I’m still a virgin!”

“Let’s set aside that question for now.”

Hey, that’s mean! I really am!

“You might have sown some of the seeds for it, but that doesn’t mean it was okay for that to happen to you. Yeah, you must have been terrified. It’s okay to cry.”

“No, that’s not it...”

“Not even that?! Get it over with and cry already!”

Why?!

“Just listen! So the professor who assaulted me—”

“Professor?!” Iroha hits the table and rises to her feet yet again. “Professor?! Oh no, I’ve heard enough! A professor! ...A damn *professor!!*” She bangs the table several times.

“I-Iroha, stop making so much noise...”

Everyone in the shop is staring at us. Talk about awkward...

“Um...hey, didn’t you see the noticeboard? There was a professor who got in big trouble, right? It would’ve been on the news, too.”

“That was you?!”

“H-hey, it wasn’t my fault. *He* attacked *me*.”

“Yeah, well, I guess that’s true...” Iroha lets out a big sigh and takes her seat. She sips at her iced coffee, which is really melted ice with hints of coffee at this point. “And?” Oh, Iroha must’ve worn herself out.

“So the guy was a professor, and it was such a big deal, the university took disciplinary action against him, right? Which means word is going to spread. People are already saying I’m a slut who leads her professors on, and that’s not even the worst rumor. They’re saying I’m a bitch who got the boys of the photography club wrapped around her little finger and started bilking them for money. It’s horrible. These rumors are coming out of nowhere.”

“I wouldn’t say *nowhere*.”

“I-it is nowhere. And so...in the end, everything is still on edge in the club, and that girl quit and swore she wouldn’t have anything to do with me. Then, when I tried to do the responsible thing and quit, too, the members stopped me. So now I have no idea what to do...”

“You aren’t the Otaku Club Princess so much as a quintessential club wrecker,” she tells me coldly. “I get the picture, though. I can see why you’d want to cry in that situation.”

“.....”

“No way—don’t tell me there’s more?”

“...Um, don’t be shocked.”

“Pfft, seriously? We’re way past shocked at this point.”

“Come on!”

“Why wouldn’t I be?! ...Ugh, anyway, what is it that’s really got you down?”

“Well...thanks to all this, I’ve gained a lot of influence. I could make a lot of people quit the club now, or even drop out of school if I really wanted to.”

“...And?”

I summon my determination and tell her. “It feels good.”

“What?”

“This whole situation, having so many fates in the palm of my hand—it feels good. I could crush the elite of Tokyo University with just a few lies or a little flirting. It gives me chills to imagine what would happen if I actually did it. It even turns me on.”

I cradle my head.

“And that side of me is what makes me want to cry!”

Iroha throws her cup at me. I can't blame her. Tee-hee!

After parting ways with Iroha, I head to a large park with my single-lens reflex camera in hand. I'm here to capture the park in the sunset light. The scent of the summer grass is heavy, and the air itself feels as if it's buzzing with the cries of the cicadas.

I started riding a motorbike and living on my own after I started college, and it's opened up my world to so much more than when I was in high school.

In a way, I feel I've come to know myself bit by bit.

When I was a high schooler, I was just studying in a blind haze, aiming for the top. It seemed hopeless, though, because I always had rivals I couldn't best and barriers I couldn't overcome. Iroha was the prime example of that, and I constantly felt defeated when it came to her. In my jealousy, I lost sight of myself.

Iroha is a revolutionary at heart. She's never content with the status quo. She will always try to push herself and the world ever forward. She even entered Tokyo University's medical school so she could change the world through medicine, which is a reason that makes no sense to the average person. She is sincerely ready to carry the world on her back, and I know she can do it.

I understand it now. There was no way I could win against someone like that by delving into my studies with no direction. Iroha may be quieter now after her setbacks, but there isn't a doubt in my mind that once she is rested and recovered, she will be moving toward the revolution.

I'm fundamentally different from Iroha. I can't be like her, nor would I want to be. I can't even think about the world in any serious capacity. At best, all I care about is if those nearest and dearest to me are happy. Given my personality, Iroha will always be out of my league.

But I'm beginning to believe that maybe that's okay.

I'm after something different from Iroha. I know exactly what it is, too, now

that I've leveled up (or down?) into a club wrecker.

I want to make others act as I intend.

I want to make others into my puppets.

Oh, I am aware that desire is twisted. It isn't pretty, at least. All the same, I seem to have quite a knack for it, and it's an ability society needs.

In the past, a certain advertising agency once advocated ten maxims of strategy:

1. Make them use more.
2. Make them throw things away.
3. Make them consume wastefully.
4. Make them forget the season.
5. Make them give gifts.
6. Make them buy in sets.
7. Create opportunities.
8. Make them out of fashion.
9. Make them buy out of comfort and familiarity.
10. Create confusion.

These maxims really hit home for me when I saw them.

If I unleash my desire and demonstrate my talent, I'm sure I can drive the economy forward and contribute to society. There is a place where I'm needed.

At heart, I am an instigator.

I want to see the masses do my silly dance.

Life has become much easier now that I've found my path. I can proceed on a straight course without any wasted stamina or energy. I've started my search for employment in an advertising agency or the media.

If I excel as an instigator, I can probably even partner up with a revolutionary like Iroha, for instance. When that day comes, I will be able to stand on equal

footing with her. Maybe I'll be one of the people effecting change on the world. Then my inferiority complex toward Iroha will be gone.

And yet—

“I don't really need to become someone so important.”

If I can move just one person to keep loving me and build a happy family with me, that would be enough.

“Kazuki...”

But my genuine, once-in-a-lifetime love will never be returned.

“Ugh...”

Though I sigh, the corners of my mouth perk up. Kazuki belongs to Maria Otonashi through and through.

But for whatever reason, I get the feeling that's how I want it. It's right that my love goes unrequited.

That declaration of Otonashi's.

I had a big laugh the first time I heard about her announcement after we'd graduated. Poor Kazuki—the girl who finally got him is ridiculous.

But Kazuki needs that sort of power now.

“Oh.”

The sunset has painted the sky in lovely colors, and the reflection on the pond is just what I had in mind. I center the couple paddling a boat in the reticle and take my pictures. After a few different angles and exposure lengths, I'm able to snap some that are to my liking.

“Okay.”

Even someone like me can take beautiful pictures.

I have it in me to keep finding beauty, too.

There's a little over two years until the day Otonashi finishes what she started with that announcement.

In the meantime, I'd like to close the distance between my dream and where I

am now. I'd like to be able to believe, to really, truly believe, that I'm fine the way I am.

...And, if possible, I'd like to find an even more amazing partner than Kazuki!

Yes. That is my wish.

✧✧✧ Haruaki Usui (19), August 14 ✧✧✧

Until that moment, my heart was full of darkness.

I'd given up on my dream of becoming a professional baseball player when I chose to go to school with Kokone Kirino and Daiya Oomine and make sure they were okay—and things couldn't have gone much worse. Daiyan went off on some crazy plan and got himself stabbed. Kiri was hurt so badly that she'll probably never heal. Hosshi can't even talk with us anymore. I lost everyone who meant something to me.

My normal life was destroyed beyond all recognition.

I spent that time locked inside my own head. I saw the world through a fog, and nothing felt real. I managed to make it to school, but I couldn't do anything that mattered. I was just moving around on autopilot to stay alive, like some bug. I realized that some days, I went home without speaking a single word.

During that period, Iroha Shindo and Yuri Yanagi graduated, Daiyan and then Kiri dropped out, Hosshi's parents officially notified the school that he was taking a leave of absence, and Kasumi transferred. I was the only one who made it to third year. My few scattered memories of then are vague.

But Maria Otonashi dispelled the darkness with words alone.

It was about nine months after everyone went away—the July 15 of my last year in high school. Maria Otonashi was elected student council president.

All the students were gathered in the gymnasium for the ceremony as each council member passed the baton to their successor. Unlike our regular assemblies, everyone was focused on the podium. No one was yawning or fidgeting.

The one they were looking at was obviously not our previous student council president, who wasn't especially remarkable.

It was our next president, Maria Otonashi.

She had occasionally come to my class to check up on me, but I'd always ignored her. I didn't believe she had done anything really wrong; I just couldn't bring myself to be on close terms with her again.

Somewhere deep down, I probably felt she was the outsider who'd wrecked everything.

The Maria Otonashi standing at the podium was not quite as mysterious as before, but she was still as charismatic as ever. That charisma won her the election by a landslide, and it was why she had everyone's full attention even then. I'm sure no one had forgotten that incident after she delivered her speech as the first-year representative, when she parted the students between her and Hosshi like Moses parting the Red Sea.

The situation was similar to back then. We were all wondering: *Is she going to pull something again?*

Maria Otonashi began her inauguration speech as the new student council president. Her pronunciation was clear, her intonation was crisp, and the content of her speech was what our hearts needed to hear.

Everyone, not only me, could palpably feel the strange atmosphere over our school. That was partially due to having so many incidents back-to-back, like the murders and the dog-people panic, but there was also something else, a sense that something even bigger had taken place very close to us. Something just felt wrong, although we couldn't remember what it was for whatever reason.

We had been controlled by something and then set free.

There was no evidence for it, so it was hard to put into words. All the same, it hung over us like a curse. It left us feeling trapped, almost choking. It was a crushing kind of malaise. Bringing it up never failed to make things uncomfortable, so after a while, merely mentioning it was taboo.

However, Maria Otonashi didn't shy away from this taboo in her speech. She put the sensation into precise words, explained it, and then presented a

solution for releasing us from it. Her strategy had both conceptual ideas and concrete details.

This was exactly what the school body had been longing to hear.

The students held their breath as they listened to her speech, and the air was tense. They didn't want to miss a single syllable.

I could see she was an incredible woman.

But for me, there was still one thought in the way—that this still wasn't enough to bring everyone back. That's why not even her brilliant speech was enough to stick in my head.

“—I will work my hardest to make life at this school as fulfilling as before. I am honored to be your new student council president.”

That sounded like the end, so everyone started clapping. But Maria Otonashi stuck out her hands to make us stop.

“In closing, I would like to make a personal announcement.”

Her whole manner changed, both her tone and her expression.

“When Kazuki Hoshino turns twenty years old, I will marry him.”

“...What?”

It was such sudden, random claim that I couldn't help but make a sound. The other students, the teachers, and everyone else there were totally floored.

“We will get married, and we'll be happier than anyone else.” Despite what she was saying, Maria Otonashi started crying.

The students and pretty much everyone else knew about Hosshi's condition. We knew they were in a relationship, and that she took care of him every day.

“And it's not for anyone else—it's just for me!”

Was she crying because her emotions had gotten the better of her?

No. She wasn't saying this because she was drunk on herself; I could tell that from her anguished expression.

Which meant...

I knew it intuitively.

This was an *apology*.

For some reason, Maria Otonashi felt responsible for the cloud hanging over our school.

That was why she was desperately telling us she was sorry, why she was trying so hard to make amends for her sins.

I wasn't certain why, but I was starting to wonder if maybe Hosshi was the person who was most involved with the source of that malaise. It would be harder to bring back normality for him than anyone else. But if he was going to get married and be happy, he would need to return to normal, of course.

So what Maria Otonashi was really announcing then was that *she would fight to take back normality for the one who would be the hardest to save*.

If she could accomplish that, then doing it for the rest of us would be easy. She would save all of us.

That was why Maria Otonashi was doing it—because she believed it was the best way to atone.

I'm sure most people didn't pick up on her true intent. All the same, they could feel it. The emotion in her voice and expression was enough to tell them that this seemingly egotistical announcement was actually meant to encourage them.

Our normal life would return.

When Maria Otonashi bowed her head, clenching her fists at her side instead of wiping away her tears, the applause threatened to break the whole gym apart.

That was the moment.

That clapping cleared the fog over me so quickly it was almost funny. My chest grew hot all at once, and the heat thawed my heart so it could beat again. *Ba-dum. Ba-dum.* It felt like the first time in a while I had heard that sound.

Oh, that's right...

Just like Maria Otonashi, I wanted forgiveness, too. I had failed to save my friends, and I could never let myself live it down. That was the number one cause of my funk.

That's why I had to find my own means of redemption. I would never move forward until I found it in me to forgive myself.

And now that I knew what to do, it was time for me to find a way to do it.

Although Maria Otonashi did dispel the despair from our school, that didn't mean my friends came back while I was there. I was still alone, but I didn't lead the dead existence I had before.

Since I couldn't find the answer of how to redeem myself, I threw myself into everything in life full force. I put everything I had into each day, whether it got me results or not. Miraculously enough, in the final summer tournament of my third year of high school, I was able to lead our small and weak school baseball team to second place in the regionals. I was the MVP.

I graduated and enrolled in the acclaimed Waseda University. It was a school I would never have gotten into with my grades even if the world went crazy for a while, but believe it or not, I passed the selection process for the baseball team and got a recommendation. My guess is that it was thanks to my hard-won second-place victory.

While it's nice that I got in, I'm clearly one of the weak links on the Waseda baseball team. I don't have the stamina of the team members hailing from famous schools, and I can't even keep up in practice. The coaches are even dropping hints suggesting I become a manager instead. If things keep going this way, I'll probably finish out my four years without ever once taking the field in an official game.

But I'm fine with that. I've decided to devote my time at college to baseball, even if it doesn't amount to anything.

"Usui, you're throwing with your hand. Use your lower body more!" Coach Miyashiro shouts to me as I practice pitching in the bullpen. He likes to live on the wild side, more like someone you'd find at the horse races than on a baseball field. If I saw him out of uniform, I'd never even guess he was a coach. He's also the only one here who sees something in me.

“...Coach, there’s something I want to ask you.”

“Huh? What is it?”

“Why did you put in a good word for me during the selection? There were plenty of people who were cut who can throw better than me.”

“Who told you about that? ...Ah, I guess that don’t matter. You’re askin’ why? I ain’t gonna tell ya if you just want me to cheer your sorry ass up.”

“No, all I want is to know what you think my strengths are. I want to try to build on them if I can.”

“Hmm... Well, in that case...” Coach Miyashiro scratches his head. “Well, you could throw a decent pitch even though you were way outta shape, for one. Meant you had promise.”

“Yeah, and that’s why I can’t keep up in practice.”

“You some kinda masochist? But you don’t look depressed, at least... Heh, that’s the other thing. I can see something in your eyes.”

“My eyes? You mean you can see my determination to succeed?”

“No, because I can’t. Even if I could, there’s a million other guys out there who got a can-do attitude on their side. No, all the guys who hit it big are hungry for it, and you ain’t got that, either. You don’t even seem to care about baseball all that much. You look like shit.”

“Geez...”

“But—” He scratches his stubble. “I can tell you know real despair.”

I fall silent.

“That’s why you don’t get the blues about every little thing. You keep your head in the game. Remember tryouts? You didn’t lose your cool even though there was a guy with a better arm right next to you.”

It’s true; I didn’t care about what everyone else could do. Even if I didn’t, I wouldn’t change. In the end, all I can do is give it everything I have.

“I know one guy with eyes like yours. He was a pitcher till he threw out his shoulder at Koshien. After that, he planned to give up on baseball—maybe even

woulda given up on living—but I forced him to join the team. That guy practiced until he collapsed every day, and when it was game time, he hit like you wouldn't believe. He was such a slugger that I asked him how he was able to hit like that. What do you think he said?"

Coach Miyashiro smirks.

"Doesn't matter if I can't hit. It's not like I'm gonna die."

He sighs.

"What do you think? Doesn't make much sense to me. But I got a hunch it does make sense to you."

"...What's he doing now?"

"Makin' hundreds of millions a year. I don't even know how much."

I get it. Coach Miyashiro is evaluating me based on that person. To put it another way, he doesn't really think much of my own abilities.

But I'm still not going to lose hope in myself. I kneel down and pick up the ball.

"So what you're saying is that he just had talent."

"Right. I thought you might have the gift, too. I got no idea if you're actually talented or not. Are ya disappointed?"

I put my fingers on the seam of the ball in my mitt.

"...Coach. There's one guy I don't think I'll ever be able to beat in my life."

"Really? High praise comin' from you. You don't even think Yoshino is better than you."

Yoshino was a pitcher who had a sure shot at the pros straight out of high school and chose to play college ball for Waseda instead.

"This guy go to the pros? What's his name?"

I told him. "Daiya Oomine."

"...Never heard of him."

"I'm not surprised. But I'm always trying to reach him."

I take a deep breath and wind up for another pitch. I bring my left leg down and drive my cleats into the ground. I imagine the power from that stomp shooting up and through me in a straight line to my fingertips in my right hand. The shock pulses through every muscle in my body; the rest I leave to instinct. My body responds on its own, and my arm swings as hard as it can.

The bullpen rings with a satisfying *wham*.

“Hey, that was some nice spin on that ball! Now that’s what I’m talkin’ about!”

I’ve been living full blast since Maria Otonashi’s announcement. I’m just running blindly forward, unsure of what will change about me by doing so.

Lately, I’ve been noticing the results, and I finally feel as if I understand what I’ve been missing.

Why couldn’t I save anyone?

—It was because I didn’t have the resolve.

I never plunged straight into the heart of things; I always tried to stay on the sidelines. I didn’t involve myself in Daiyan and Kiri’s business any more than I had to, either. I believed I was standing at the right distance to prevent me and anyone else from getting hurt. I was convinced that getting too close might wreck everything.

And honestly? Maybe it would’ve.

But that’s okay. If I did, I would’ve been fine.

I would’ve been fine if I’d stolen Kokone Kirino from Daiya Oomine.

If I wasn’t prepared to do that, then I could never hope to change anything fate throws at me. My biggest crime is taking so long to figure it out.

Daiya Oomine, the one I looked up to—he was always resolved. I can’t say he was right to disregard his own happiness. But he was ready to face the hard stuff, and I could learn a thing or two from his way of life.

I have never been able to surpass Daiya, not since the first time we met.

“Doesn’t matter if I can’t hit. It’s not like I’m gonna die.”

I know exactly what that slugger wanted to say. Putting it all on the line for a dream and then losing isn't enough to kill us or even makes us lose hope. We know an even greater despair. That's why we can be brave and take on anything without a hint of fear. Other guys might be too scared to bet a huge pile of coins, but for us, it's a cinch.

Daiyan—I've finally figured out a way to stand shoulder to shoulder with you.

I won't sacrifice myself like you did, though. I'll discover my own resolve.

When I find that answer, I will forgive myself for my powerlessness.

There's a year and some change until Maria Otonashi does what she said she'll do.

I promise I will find my way before then.

And when I do, my wish will have been granted.

✦✦✦ **Kokone Kirino (16), September 23** ✦✦✦

I was in the hospital after I stabbed myself, but Daiya didn't come to see me until after he had officially dropped out of school. He had taken out his earrings and dyed his hair black. When he saw me on the bed, he smiled softly and stroked my cheek.

It was just like before, when our love was innocent— No, I couldn't even bring myself to pretend that was true. Neither Daiya nor I was as pure as we were then.

I pressed both of my hands against his as he cradled my cheek. I never want to forget that wonderful feeling.

When I let go of Daiya's hand, he pulled it away.

And then I realized something. "You're going to disappear again."

Daiya's eyes widened; then he smiled ruefully. "You really can see right through me."

"Where are you going this time?"

I couldn't read his smile. "I don't know."

"You don't know..."

"I do know what's important. All I can do is stay by your side. That's all. Kazu made that painfully clear to me."

"Then do it..."

Daiya shook his head slightly. "...You of all people should understand. I've done too much wrong. I led so many people astray and destroyed their futures. I can't be with you until I pay for my sins. What I don't know is how. So I have no choice but to wander until I do." Daiya lowered his eyes quietly. "I'll keep thinking about how to take responsibility. Maybe I won't find the answer in a year, or ten years, or even in a lifetime. And even if I do, the weight of what I've done will still be a heavy burden to bear."

"Daiya..."

"However, I *can* say one thing."

Daiya then kissed me.

"I will come back to you."

Tears were flowing down my cheeks as our lips parted.

"You have to."

"I know."

"You have to come back."

"I know."

Daiya brushed away my tears with his fingers.

"I'd never get that wrong."

That's what he said.

That's what he promised.

But the next time I see Daiya, he's in a hospital bed hooked up to all kinds of medical equipment.

He was stabbed in the back by one of his fanatical believers, a middle school

girl. She was arrested right away, but he had suffered a life-threatening injury. While they managed to save his life, the massive bleeding had affected his brain and left him unresponsive.

Daiya is in a coma. His windpipe has been cut open to attach an artificial respirator. I can hear the beeping of the electrocardiogram and the pumping of the respirator. Tubes are stuck in his nose.

Seeing him like this makes me start to cry. His chest moves up and down, and his eyes even blink once in a while, but he doesn't even look human anymore. I can't think of this as the real Daiya, just some other creature in the shape of him.

He doesn't regain consciousness even after a month.

Though Daiya's parents had fought with him and practically disowned him, partly due to what happened with me and Miyuki Karino, they stop by almost every day. Lots of other people visit, too. Haru and Kasumi and our other classmates. Maria Otonashi. Yuri Yanagi and Iroha Shindo. Miyuki Karino herself. Even Riko Asami, who apparently works on a farm in Hokkaido, is kind enough to drop by. Some of Daiya's former followers have returned to their senses, unlike the middle schooler who stabbed him, and they also come. No matter who visits, though, Daiya's condition never changes. He never responds, not even a little.

My family and Daiya's parents tried to stop me, but I quit school so I can spend every day by his side nursing him. I believe the best medicine to bring him back is me, staying nearby so he can hear my voice.

But how much I speak to him doesn't make any difference. I watch him every day, and not all days are the same. Sometimes he shows signs of life, but only traces, nothing substantial. The crucial things stay the same. He remains something not quite human.

What's worse, his chances of recovery drop more and more with the passage of time.

My fears that he might never wake up grow day by day. The anxiety is like a ravenous monster eating away at my hope.

I start to feel less and less.

And then, before I know it, my emotions are gone.

By the time another month rolls by in November, I have wasted away so much that even I can see it. Daiya's doctors are even recommending that I visit a clinic for psychosomatic issues.

I wipe away Daiya's tears with some gauze. These aren't tears of emotion, but something more like a biological response. A thought pops into my head as I work.

—What if this is the atonement Daiya was talking about? Is this condition Daiya's way of punishing himself? Does this clear him of his misdeeds?

That would be too selfish of him.

He cares about me more than that.

I press down on my abdomen. There's a scar there that will probably be there for the rest of my life. It's where I stabbed myself in the belief that it would save Daiya.

"I don't care if I die, so grant Daiya a happy future."

That was what I wholeheartedly believed back then. I still do. I will always be ready to give my life for Daiya.

Yes, Daiya may have done some awful things, and maybe he needs to pay for them. Does he have to bear the burden all on his own, though? Couldn't I or the people around him take on a bit of it? Is there no forgiveness for him no matter what he does?

Is that how it is? Is that why this happened to him?

Yeah...that's right. The world is always cruel to us. I know that very well. You can see it right there on my back.

If that's how things are—

"I've had enough."

—we'll be the ones to forsake this world.

I can remove the machines hooked up to Daiya and let his body shut down. I'll

do that. Then I can move on to the next stage. Maybe Daiya's soul is already waiting for me in heaven.

If so, then I should go through with it right away!

I grab the tubes plugged into Daiya's nose.

Just pull these out—that's all it would take to end it. I'm sure no one would blame me. No, even if they did, I'll be going on after him anyway.

...Daiya, you must have been lonely. I'm sorry. I'll be there soon.

"Ngh, nh..."

But I can't find the strength.

I let go of the tubes.

This thing doesn't look human at all—but it still looks like Daiya. I can't bring myself to end its life as long as there is even the slightest possibility he might wake up. It's too much for me even if the chances are slim to none.

Yes, I know. All I'm doing is dragging this out. I know, but I can't do anything about it.

I'm powerless.

What a dead end.

I break down in tears on top of Daiya. He's so thin now.

Even two months later when the new year begins, Daiya shows no indications of returning to consciousness. He does breathe on his own at times, but apparently that doesn't have much to do with his coming out of his coma. The doctor in charge of Daiya had seemed pessimistic about his prospects from the very beginning, and as time has passed, he's been getting more and more blunt about it. Daiya's parents believe he will return to normal, but at the same time, I catch glimpses of resignation. They've started hinting at me, like, "Maybe it's time we gave him peace?"

It's ridiculous. They're acting as if I'm forcing Daiya's body to live on for my own selfish reasons when I'm the one who wants him free from this more than anyone.

"I would do anything for you," I once told him, and that wasn't a lie.

Yet, I just can't bring myself to commit a double suicide. I don't know if it's right to take Daiya's life with my own hands. No, I would never be able to go through with it even if I did decide it was right.

I do realize something, though.

I am incapable of ending Daiya's life.

But I can end mine.

I'm sure he's waiting for me in heaven. And if by some chance he isn't in the afterlife, then he's still alive, and that's hardly a problem.

I can't believe such a good idea never occurred to me before now!

I sneak in a knife the next day.

Instead of stabbing myself in the abdomen like before, I'm going to cut the arteries in my neck and then run to Daiya. That's what I've decided.

My head is so full of thoughts of my own death that I forget today is the day Maria Otonashi is coming to visit.

Maria Otonashi is the one who did the right thing, called an ambulance, and barely kept Daiya's body here with us. She may have forgotten about it herself, but it's all there clear as day in the records.

I'm grateful to her for what she did. And yet, for some reason, I can't get along with her the way I could before.

Maria Otonashi plays the music box she brought with her by Daiya's ear. Apparently, some people have recovered consciousness at the sound of a music box. I know it won't work, though. If he was going to react to something like that, he would have responded to my voice long before now.

I want Maria Otonashi to leave as soon as possible.

Once she's gone, then I can die.

"...Kirino." Maria Otonashi suddenly embraces me.

"Huh?"

I guess I must've looked really depressed?

...No, that's not it. She's not hugging me. She's reaching into my pocket.

"Ah..."

She pulls out the knife in its leather cover and heaves a long sigh.

"I thought something must be up. You've been fidgety and glancing at your pocket since I arrived, but... What were you planning to—? No, don't bother. I can guess."

Instantly, I'm boiling with rage at her all-knowing attitude.

As if you have any idea what I'm going through!

"Give it back!" I scream. "Give it back, give it back, give it back!"

I'm hysterical now, and the nurses are starting to come over to see what I'm screaming about. Not even that causes me to calm down, though, and I lunge at Maria Otonashi.

But it's no use. She maneuvers behind me, puts me in a hold, and effortlessly renders me immobile.

"Stop, let me go! Let me go! Give me the knife!" The tears spill out as my emotions explode inside me. "I have to! I have to die and go be with Daiya!"

"Damn...why are you both like this?!"

"Like what?!"

"I respect your resolve, and Oomine's. But your willingness to abandon your own needs and throw your lives away is completely wrong. It's meaningless. All you're doing is bringing each other sorrow. Just as you wish more than anyone for Oomine to be happy, he wants happiness for you, too. You've already experienced the pain of being in the opposite position; how do you still not get it?!"

While her intensity makes me flinch, I still argue back. "Oh, so sacrificing yourself is a bad thing now? You're one to talk! You're giving everything to Kazu right now!"

"Yes, in the past, I was always ignoring my own needs, too. I accept that. But

it's different now. I'm by Kazuki's side for my own happiness. He needs me, and he can't be happy if I'm gone. I won't sacrifice myself anymore. I can't."

Maria Otonashi releases me. I still glare at her, though.

"I know because I used to be like you. Why do we do what we do even when it hurts us? Why do we make that mistake?"

She tells me the answer coldly.

"It's because we're weak. Because we can't accept reality."

"S-so what if I can't? Th-there's nothing I can do about it! Daiya's a vegetable! The one I love is a vegetable! You think anyone can just deal with it?! Daiya is my everything! This world stole it all from me. What do you think I can do?!" I shout. "What am I supposed to do?!"

I don't think she can answer that question. I don't think there's any answer to give.

And yet, Maria Otonashi replies as if it's nothing.

"Believe that Oomine will recover."

I bite down on my lip.

She says it so easily!

"I can't believe that! I know. I know how cruel this world is. Do you know just how much it took from us? How do you expect me to believe in miracles after everything?!"

"I'm not saying believe in the world or any of that. I know as well as you do that the world doesn't answer prayers."

"See! Then all your nice little—"

"But I do believe in Kazuki."

"Wh-what—?"

"I know Kazuki would never leave me alone. That's why I believe in my heart that he will make it back to a normal life."

"...H-how...can you have faith in something like that...?"

That's right. Maria Otonashi is in the same position as me. It's not unreasonable to think she would feel the same hopelessness I do.

And yet, her eyes haven't lost hope at all.

Why? What's the difference between us?

"Don't you think so, too?"

—Yes, of course that's how it is.

"Don't you believe that Oomine would never leave you this way?"

It's about having faith in the one you love.

"I will come back to you."

Yes.

Daiya promised me, but I didn't believe him one bit. And what's worse, I tried to kill the girl Daiya loves more than anyone.

Could I have betrayed him any more deeply?

"I—I..."

I can't find it in me to be optimistic about Daiya's recovery. I don't have faith that his feelings for me are enough to bring him back.

"...Hey, Daiya, what should I— Huh?"

Daiya is crying. Wordlessly, voicelessly crying his eyes out.

Is this just another biological response? ...No, that can't be it. He's crying too hard, and the timing is too perfect.

"...Oh."

Yes, my voice has reached him. And my actions are hurting him.

Daiya knows I want to end my own life, but he can't do anything about it. All he can do is blame himself for hurting me. He must be so frustrated; he must be in so much pain.

And here I am failing to understand his feelings, on the verge of taking away something so dear to him. I was completely ignorant of how deeply that would have wounded him.

His heart is all that's keeping him tied to this world; if I were gone, I'm sure those tenuous threads would break. He would likely never awaken.

I finally get it.

"Daiya needs me."

Just as I need him.

"I'm sorry."

I'm sorry for not realizing something so simple.

"I'm so sorry...!"

I clutch Daiya's body and sob loudly.

Meanwhile, Maria Otonashi watches on in silence. She merely winds the music box quietly and plays its gentle melody.

Another six months pass, and we enter July.

I hear Maria Otonashi became the student council president and declared she would marry Kazu.

Other people may not get it, but I do. She's strong; she can maintain her faith in Kazu. It'll wear her down, though. Each day he's unresponsive will eat away at her heart.

That's why she's keeping her spirits up with this announcement.

"Daiya." I stroke his back and say his name. He doesn't respond, of course.

I won't consider killing myself again. I believe in Daiya. But there are days when I almost falter. Even the mighty Maria Otonashi isn't invincible, so it's no surprise it happens to a weak person like me.

I play the music box Maria Otonashi brought.

Recently, I'm actually the one getting encouraged by the sound.

"Phew..."

I let out a little breath.

Even after the lesson Maria Otonashi taught me, I still can't bring myself to trust in fate. I will always believe that the world is harsh toward us.

However, bit by bit, I am changing.

Little by little, I'm starting to trust in people.

There is a little over two years until Maria Otonashi makes good on her promise.

By then, I hope I can feel the same warmth in my heart that I used to have.

That is my wish.

"Your wish is the same, isn't it, Daiya?" I ask him, smiling.

As far as I can tell, my smile is bright and unclouded.

Daiya's eyes follow my expression.

He is clearly peering into my face.

"Huh...?"

✦✦✦ **Kazuki Hoshino (19), October 3** ✦✦✦

Thinking again. Suddenly. Before was only chaos, a jumble of stuff I couldn't process. Like I was here, but my mind was far away. Sometimes I wanted to move, but I didn't. Like me and my body were separate things. Couldn't stop it. Just acted on its own.

Now I finally have control. But I'm not completely free. Like choosing the correct response with the channel button on a TV remote. Sometimes I mess up, press the wrong button.

I recall language relatively quickly from the jumble. Because someone keeps talking to me. My knowledge comes back, too. My memory, though, is fragmented. Broken and unreliable. Doesn't really feel like mine. It's scattered like a jigsaw puzzle I can't put together. Maybe I'll never put it together.

I try walking around the house. It's empty. No one's here. My big sister, Roo, isn't home, either. Actually, Roo cries a lot and says I'm not myself. Oh. I always thought this me had no connection to me. I thought I was just seeing a lot of

strange images. I had it wrong. I am me. I know that now.

I go to the kitchen. I open the cupboard and eat a cookie from a box. I could eat even when I wasn't me. I vaguely remember eating before. My mom would always ask me if it was good, but I didn't really understand. I did know I would be like "Whoa" when it was spicy. I had rice every day. It was kind of soggy and flavorless, so I hated it. I only ate candy because I only understood sweet things. One day, my mom put something on my rice. She called it "*furikake* powder." Suddenly, rice tasted like something. I started to like rice. The *furikake* was like magic.

When I stop at the entryway, the door opens. The girl's eyes widen, but she quickly smiles. Maybe because I rarely leave my room.

This is the woman who lives with me. Her smell is refreshing, and I'm happy to see her. "Kazuki, I'm home. I met with Usui today. I was surprised at how muscular he's gotten." I don't know who this Usui person is, but I nod my head. The woman's eyes turn as round as circles. "...It's almost like you understand me. Do you understand what I'm saying?" I nod my head again. The woman's face turns bright red, and she calls for my family. Um, no one's here. Maybe I should tell her? I try to speak. But I can't. The words in my head and the words in my mouth aren't connected. I try to talk, but it comes out as gibberish.

My head still isn't clear inside. It's a mess, like everything's scrambled with a mixer. It's so hard to put each piece back.

But I still remember the most important word.

Maria.

That's her name.

My family is happy I can think again. Maria, too. But I still can't talk to them.

But my family talks to me more about things. Before, everyone except for Maria had trouble talking to me. Now, I think they like it. That makes me happy, too.

I'm in the same room every day. I only go into the other rooms when someone calls me. Maria lives here, too. I don't remember from when. She isn't family, so I think it's strange we live together. But nobody in my family

complains about it, so they must be right. Still, when I hear Maria snoring on the top bunk, I get strangely excited. I can't help but think that maybe we shouldn't live together.

Maria and the others often try to make me go outside. They do it more now that I can think again.

I hate it outside, though. Too much light. Too many colors. Too much information in my eyes and in my head. I scream and cry, and my head always starts to hurt. When I cry at Maria for making me go outside, she finally brings me back to my room. She always looks very sad. Well, she shouldn't do it in the first place.

Maria says something to me every day.

"I'm going to marry you."

"Marry." I know that word. It means becoming family. It's something people who love each other do. But I don't understand. If we're living together, do we need to get married?

"I won't force you, though. I'll wait until you truly want to."

She says that every day, too.

"And if you don't try to take back your normal life, we won't do it at all."

She says that, too. I'm sick of hearing it.

I'm kind of angry. I don't understand what Maria wants to say, but she's giving me some ridiculous orders. She's being selfish.

When I turn away from her, Maria looks very sad. Sadder than ever before.

For some reason, my chest has hurt all day. It bothers me so much, I can't sleep, and I start crying on the bottom bunk. Maria notices and comes down from her bed and hugs me. "What's wrong?" she asks. I feel better. She's warm. I want her to do this forever.

Finally, I realize why I'm sad. It's because Maria looked so sad earlier. I never want to see her make that face again. If Maria's sad, I'm sad.

How can I make it so she isn't sad?

I should probably listen to everything she says. Then we'll be able to get married like she wants. I'm sure that once we're married, Maria will always be smiling.

Imagining it makes me happy.

So I'll try to endure, even when it's hard.

I start going outside without anyone asking. Because that's what Maria wants.

When Maria and I go on a walk, people from the neighborhood usually say hello. I feel like I know them, but I've never really talked to any of them before. They talk like they care, but it's completely different from Maria or my family. They use the same words, but they don't mean them. They give me mean looks, too. If I was dancing around naked, they'd act the same way. It makes me mad. When I get too mad, Maria looks at me and says, "Shall we call it a day?" Then she brings me back to my room.

I'm scared of people I know and of complete strangers. Most people ignore us or look away, but the ones who don't always stare. It happens a lot. It puts me in a bad mood. I can't tell what they're thinking like I can with Maria and my family. Maybe they're gonna run up to us and kill us. Imagining it makes me too scared to move. Each time that happens, Maria gently says, "It's okay."

People aren't the only obstacles outside. There are these big things that are really fast, and I know if one of them hit me, I would die. I'm terrified of them. Everyone else doesn't mind them, but I can't get over it. I remember someone named Mogi. One of them hit her, and something really bad happened to her. I also remember hearing that thousands of people die because of them each year. If so, then why is everyone okay with them? My hand tightens on Maria's when cars and motorcycles pass by too close. Maria usually squeezes my hand back and smiles at me.

But the trains are even worse than the streets. Lots of strangers riding around inside of big boxes. Everyone is all crushed together. The information overload is too much for me. My mind can't keep up. I have to think about dozens of people at once. Have I met this person before and I just don't remember? Are those smartphones they're staring at really so interesting? I wonder if they think lots of different things like I do. I wonder if they all have their own lives.

My head feels like it's going to explode with all these thoughts. Maria says, "You don't need to worry about other people," but I can't do that. I still can't sort out information. I can't tell what I need and what I don't. I want to start screaming, but I hold it in. But I have my limits. When I start to think I can't take any more, Maria always gets me off the train at the next station. She rubs my back and helps me calm down.

Even though I can't speak, Maria always does what I want her to do. It's incredible. Maybe she has ESP?

We practice going outside for days and days. Maria says going outdoors at all is a good stimulus for me. In fact, I'm getting better at controlling myself. My thoughts are a bit more ordered. My memories connect now, and they seem to be coming back more often.

It seems Maria's goal isn't just to take me for walks outside, though. She wants to take me somewhere. I probably keep turning back partway because I can't make it all the way.

But one day, Maria happily says to me, "We made it."

The place is a hospital. I go to the hospital regularly, but this one is much bigger. Maria takes out her smartphone and calls someone. After a bit, a woman with long hair appears.

"Kazu!" She calls out to me with a big smile on her face. I think she knows me... Hmm? I get the feeling I know her very well, too. She's much thinner than the girl in my memory, but her bright eyes and double eyelids are unmistakable.

Kokone Kirino.

As soon as I remember her name, I feel a sharp pain in my chest. I think I did something awful to this person.

"It looks like he recognizes you. And I think he feels guilty."

"Really? I'm amazed you can tell; his expression didn't change."

"I know everything about Kazuki." Maria pats my back. "There's nothing to be afraid of, Kazuki. You may not remember, but Kirino came to visit you many times. By the way, haven't you been slowing down a bit lately?"

Now that Maria mentions it—a person who looked like her did come to my room before I returned to my senses. I think I saw her at least once or twice even after then. Yeah, my memory still has a way to go.

Kokone bends down and peers into my face.

“Hey. You don’t need to feel sorry. I’m grateful to you.”

Grateful? Even after I did something horrible?

I’m confused, but Kokone grabs me by the wrist and begins to walk off. I don’t know why, but when she glances back at me, she’s grinning.

“I’m glad you were able to make it all the way here. I’ve been wishing for you to get better with all my heart. And—”

Maria looks up at one of the hospital windows, then finishes the sentence. “There’s someone you have to see, and you can only meet him here.”

Kokone tells me:

“Go and see Daiya, Kazu!”

I don’t recognize the person sitting up on the bed.

But Kokone says his name is Daiya Oomine.

I remember a person named Daiya. He was really smart, and he had silver hair and earrings. This person is different, though. He has black hair and no earrings. But he’s different in a deeper way, too.

At first, I’m not sure for a moment if he’s really a “person” or not. I’ve never met a person so still. He’s almost as quiet as a plant, but he still has more raw *life* to him than any other human I know. I try to remember, but I don’t recall a friend like this.

He moves his head slowly.

“.....”

His voice is too soft, and I can’t hear what he says. I’m still frightened, unsure of what he is. Maria pushes my back, bringing my ear close to his mouth.

“...Kazu, it’s been a while.”

His voice is thin, like an old person's.

I can feel my heart stirring a little. But he still doesn't match my image of "Daiya Oomine."

"Sorry, but it seems like he still doesn't remember you."

"I see. We've both got our problems. I'd heard about it, but I'm still surprised to see Kazu like this in person. It's like he's been reborn as someone else."

"No, that's not the right way to put it. Kazuki will go back to the way he was soon. He will come back to his normal life."

"Yeah. Yeah, you're probably right..."

His expression doesn't shift much at all. Maybe he can't move his face very much yet.

"Then I guess I can't let him show me up. By the time you get married, I'll be able to walk on my own to the ceremony," he says, and he shakily extends a hand. His hand is thin and pale.

I also reach out automatically. And I see the scar on the back of my right hand.

"—Ah."

I am suddenly overwhelmed with emotion. Images of the past are coming into my head. One of them is me looking down at Daiya as he falls to his knees. I'm attacking him until he can no longer stand. I can't remember everything, but I know enough.

—I did this to him.

"Agh...aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah..."

I begin to cry right then in a loud voice. I know it won't do anything, but I can't stop myself. I just sob, drop to my knees, and put my head on the floor.

"...Otonashi. Does he do this a lot?"

He looks confused.

"No...this kind of reaction is a first."

I can't forgive myself. I hurt this person for my own desires. He wasn't the

only victim; I hurt many other people. My memories are the proof. I remember killing lots of people. I remember it made me alone.

I did all of it just so the person I love could be beside me.

Yes...I am the worst kind of criminal.

"I think Kazuki is blaming himself. That's why he's acting this way."

"...I see."

Daiya puts his hands on the rails of the bed. He grits his teeth with effort.

"You had unshakable conviction. It was for your own sake, not ours, so I can understand why you'd blame yourself for following through. But in the end, your conviction saved all of us. That's no accident. That's how your beliefs are, and you can see it if you look closely."

Then he stands up. He looks very unsteady, but he's standing on two legs.

"D-Daiya...you can stand...?"

Kokone's eyes are moist.

Daiya smiles back at her and puts his hand on my head. I'm still kneeling on the floor.

"See? I can stand up, and in the future, I'll be able to stand up even better. Thanks to you. I forgave you a long time ago."

"I forgive you, too." Kokone wipes away her tears and beams at me.

Forgive?

Everyone forgives me?

It's too perfect. Can I believe them? Is it right for them to be so kind?

When I raise my head, Daiya holds his hand out to me again.

His hand is still thin and shaking. But I can see his strength of will in his eyes.

My hand darts forward and clasps his. It feels very different from the Daiya Oomine I knew.

But he finally connects to the "Daiya Oomine" within my memories.

Yeah—

This is Daiya.

Daiya has forgiven me.

After that day, my thoughts start to process smoothly. The fog within my head clears more and more. I gradually come to understand the information I need, and I adjust to all the many colors of the world. With a little effort, I can even go outside on my own.

I meet lots of different people after that. I meet Kasumi Mogi at a huge facility with lots of people in wheelchairs called a rehabilitation center. I remember only that she was my classmate, but Mogi seems to enjoy talking about her life now. She's really cute when she smiles, but when it makes my heart beat a little faster, Maria bops me on the head. But she's usually so nice...

I meet Haruaki Usui on the baseball field of a famous university. I'm confused because he's much more intense than the Haruaki I remember. He's going to be in his first regular game, so he's extra excited.

I meet Yuri Yanagi at a café near Tokyo University. Yuri exudes more sex appeal than I recall, and she's accompanied by some men I don't know. She takes tons of photos of Maria, saying she looks like a painting. Maria isn't too happy about that.

In a park near my house, I meet my middle school classmates Nana Yanagi and Toji Kijima. Yanagi is happy that I'm better and kisses me on the cheek. Maria bops me again, even though it's not my fault.

Without exception, everyone greets me with heartfelt smiles. Why is that? Didn't I do horrible things to all of them? Why is everyone being nice to me? I've changed so much. I can't even speak.

There is one thing I'm certain of now, though. I need everyone's strength to return to normal. All of them have my scattered memories. If I talk to them, the pieces will gradually come together.

I can remember what sort of normal life I led.

Each time my memory is reinforced, I take back some of my former self.

But even after all that, I still can't speak.

The chaos in my mind is for the most part under control, so there might be another reason I can't talk.

Maybe I'm afraid. I'm afraid of the interactions I'll have once I'm able to communicate. I once put myself in total solitude. I believed it was best for me not to be involved with anyone. I thought it was right for me to be alone in this world. I still can't rid myself of that idea.

Daiya said he forgives me, but my sins run deep. I believe I should stay locked in a cell.

Yes, but I also don't think I could stand being without Maria.

I'm sure Maria couldn't take my not being here, either.

Today is Maria's graduation ceremony.

I'm cooking for Maria; she should be home soon. Avocado salad and the *karaage* fried chicken she likes. Roo even bought her favorite strawberry tarts. I was terrified of knives and fire when I first started coming back, but I'm fine with them now. I still have an affinity for sweet things, but it annoys everyone, so I've been working on my seasoning. Lately, they've complimented me on my cooking.

Maria wanted to start working immediately after graduation, but my parents were vehemently against it. They persuaded her to go to college, arguing that it would be a better way of returning the favor in the long run. She normally never changes her mind once it's made up, but maybe she had similar thoughts herself, or maybe she couldn't ignore the opinion of my parents since she's living off them, or maybe it was both. Either way, she ended up taking the entrance exam and decided to enroll in college. Beginning this spring, Maria will be Iroha's underclassman.

My days have gotten much more peaceful. Maybe they will be for a while.

But—

It happens while I'm dropping the chicken into the oil, thinking about all these things.

“—Ah.”

The world is suddenly enshrouded in fog.

I’m flung away from where I am, cut off from everything. Nothing has anything to do with me. I can’t see the meaning in anything. Nothing is solid. My memory scatters; my thoughts disperse. I fade, fade, fade, fade, fade— (Oh, I’ve reverted to what I was before I took my mind back.)

My world is dimmer than a dream, with no color or language or setting. It feels like being dropped into a bottomless swamp with my hands and feet bound. It’s hard to breathe. Yes...I once planned to sink like this, never to resurface. I struggle, but I can’t move, and I have no sense of direction. Into a void where the word “despair” doesn’t even exist—falling. I fall.

But she spoke to me that entire time without giving up, kept calling out to me: “Kazuki,” “Kazuki,” “Kazuki,” with all kinds of emotions. “Kazuki,” “Kazuki,” “Kazuki,” “Kazuki,” “Kazuki,” in so many tones of voice. “Kazuki,” “Kazuki,” “Kazuki,” “Kazuki,” “Kazuki,” “Kazuki,” “Kazuki,” but always, no matter what, with love and hope.

That’s why I can make it back.

“Kazuki!”

The haze is driven away, and I am instantly back in the kitchen. Maria’s concerned face is right next to mine. She’s holding an envelope that probably has her diploma in it, and the bouquet bound with pink string is dumped on the table.

Having come back to my senses, I quickly turn off the burner for the pot with the oil in it.

“A-are you okay, Kazuki?”

I look into Maria’s eyes and nod that I am.

Yes, there is definitely still something “empty” within me. It’s the focus of an infection that has taken root inside me. It could attack at any time. The almost infinite hours I lived through have a weight that can occasionally crush my mind. It’s too heavy for me to bear. This “emptiness,” this affliction of the mind,

can open its mouth wide at any time and lead me into its world of nothingness.

But I'm okay.

After all, I know.

I know that if it does, Maria will call to me and bring me back.

You know, I want to be with Maria forever.

How can I make that happen? If I had a whole lifetime to describe how I'm feeling, I couldn't put it into words; how can I express it to her?

Yes, but I also sense that one word might be enough.

She always brings me back with a single word, so isn't it best if I call to her the same way?

I open my mouth.

And I say that most precious word.

“ ”

It's been so long that I don't know if my pronunciation is correct, but I think I said it right.

After all, the crybaby Maria is crying tears of joy.

✦✦✦ **Maria Hoshino (18), September 8** ✦✦✦

I cut my hair before, but I've been growing it out for this day. Right now, my updo is concealed under a veil.

In the past, my long hair made me look like her.

Now that I'm eighteen, though, the resemblance has faded. There are no longer any shadows of her in me.

That definitely makes me a little uneasy.

But whenever I feel anxious, he always says the word I need to hear.

“Let's go, Maria.”

The door opens. The sky chapel on the top floor of the hotel is filled with blue. The almost blinding light shines down on the people we love, who are smiling.

I'm wearing a pure-white dress. He takes my hand and turns forward.

Our wish is eternal.

For us, this other wish, this promise before heaven, is nothing.

THE END

AFTERWORD

Good afternoon. Long time no see, my readers who have been following *The Empty Box and Zeroth Maria*. Eiji Mikage here.

When I checked, the previous volume, Volume 6, was released in January 2013. That means two years and five months passed before this final volume came out. That alone would have been fine, but there was also about two years between Volumes 4 and 5, so all I can do is apologize to the fans who have been waiting so patiently. I truly am sorry... Or what I should say is that you really can't publish things if you leave a gap like that twice. The fact that this book came out without a hitch is undeniably thanks to the fans who supported me.

However, I am a bit worried the people might not notice that the final book has come out after all this time. Tell everyone around you! I don't care if you loan it out!

The Empty Box and Zeroth Maria has been a crucial work in supporting me as an author. If you asked me whether I wanted to stick with it, my answer is that I've written everything I wanted to write, so I have no regrets in the slightest. I think I've given it all I have now. Farewell, Kazuki, Maria!

I also believe that wrapping up this series is a good opportunity to step away from light novels for the time being. (Apologies to fans of my other series.)

I haven't come to dislike writing light novels, not by any means; it's a decision made with thoughts toward living as an author from here on out. I'd like to return to Dengeki Bunko after leveling up, but at present, I'm not sure if my time away will be two years, ten, or even if I'll come back at all. Still, I am sure I will continue to be under the care of Kadokawa ASCII Media Works.

Some say that writing styles change greatly depending on where the writing is done, but I don't think that's the case. Though I follow the rules of the medium,

I write only what I want to write, or perhaps what I think I should write. I have no intention of penning anything I don't agree with. If someone does think my style has changed, that will be only because the things I want to do in that project differ from my previous work and not because of any change in the medium. I want to keep penning works with conviction, paying no mind to writing as a business.

If you happen to spot the name Eiji Mikage somewhere in the near future, I would be grateful for your patronage. All my announcements are made on Twitter first, so find me there and check it out if you feel like it.

Now for the acknowledgements.

To Miki, my current editor: Thank you very much. You came on board partway through this series, and I think it had many difficult parts. Nevertheless, you provided me with an environment that made it easy to work and allowed me to focus on writing without any stress. Thank you.

To my previous editor, Kawamoto: This series would never have come about without you. Your stern guidance to me when I was immature as both an author and a person eventually became my confidence and support. I'm here doing what I do now thanks to you.

To Tetsuo, the illustrator: I truly thank you for handling the art for such a long time, especially with many gaps, up until the very end. I wouldn't have been surprised if you gave up on me, given that you didn't know when the books would come out. I'm truly happy to have met you. The joy when I saw Maria for the first time is a feeling I still wouldn't trade for anything else.

This story also exists due to the support of many other people. It is not an exaggeration to say I owe its completion to you readers holding this book in your hands now. Frankly, without your words of encouragement, I would have tried to run after Volume 4. You have my sincerest gratitude for seizing my hands and holding them to the keyboard before they could get away.

I have also been writing songs in a group named Replica Letter. Around the time this book hits the shelves, there should be songs for *The Empty Box and Zeroth Maria* up on Nico Nico Douga and YouTube, so look up words that sound likely and give them a listen!

At any rate, I would like to bid my farewells with a promise to continue writing novels. Thank you very much for sticking with me until the end.

Eiji Mikage

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